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AN EDITORIAL ON

FAN CLUBS

Starting in this issue, we're running a regular column on science fiction fan clubs. This isn't anything which requires a fanfare of trumpets, admittedly—we'll save that for the stories that sometimes deserve it. But it does seem strange that no adequate account of these clubs has yet been published, so far as we can determine.

Books and fanzines—as the magazines put out by science fiction fans are called—are reviewed in most of the magazines. Cursory chit-chat about the doings of the fans is fairly common. But there seems to be almost nothing directly related to the clubs which have sprung up. We feel that it's about time something was done about this.

Hence, we're doing something. We'll try to give reasonably complete coverage of one fan club each issue. We're setting aside enough pages for that purpose, and we'll be happy to let the clubs use that in whatever way they wish to tell us about their organization and activities.

We've begun with the Philadelphia group, of course, because they're putting on the next World Science Fiction Convention in 1953, which makes them of particular interest just now. But after this, we'll welcome information from any other club which would like to receive some national publicity, and at the same time let others know what they are doing. We'd like to receive something of about two thousand words, covering whatever you feel would be of the widest general interest, but it's up to the club to decide what it wants to say. And don't forget to give an address where other fans (or fen) can write. For every organized fan there are probably twenty others who would like to belong to some club, if they only knew how to get in touch with others.

Frankly, we're doing this for the man who reads science fiction, but hasn't joined any group—not for the fan who is already in such a group. But it should be to everyone's interest.

It's rather surprising, too, how little information there is available on fan clubs. We recently tried to find the addresses of the clubs, and came up rudely against a blank wall. Oh, there were a few listed—Captain Ken Slater provided us with the best list we've seen. But even old-time fans who are supposed to know everything were uncertain about a lot

of addresses, and admitted there must be dozens of clubs about which they knew nothing.

Is there really no fan club anywhere in Indiana—or Missouri—or Washington State? From the stories we get, as well as the letters, there are plenty of people genuinely interested in those places. Are there only fourteen fan clubs in this country? We know that there are a lot more than that—because we've run across groups not listed. It seems to us that someone should make up a complete directory of all clubs, as a general service to everyone.

Fandom, after all, has done a lot for science fiction. It's true that no editor can cater exclusively to the fans—but on the other hand, every editor we've known has admitted that the fans have had a large influence on his magazine. The fan clubs have helped here, too. They've encouraged fans, and they've helped to win some of the general acceptance with which science fiction is regarded today. The World Science Fiction Conventions have been a direct outgrowth of these fan groups. So have many of the publishing houses which first began putting science fiction in hard covers, before the major publishers took it up.

And in case anyone thinks that fan clubs are made up of screaming kids in Buck Rogers suits with atomic water pistols, they should see for themselves how wrong they are. We've been at a number of such meetings, and we've found that the fans are interesting, mature-minded (regardless of age), and generally nice people to meet.

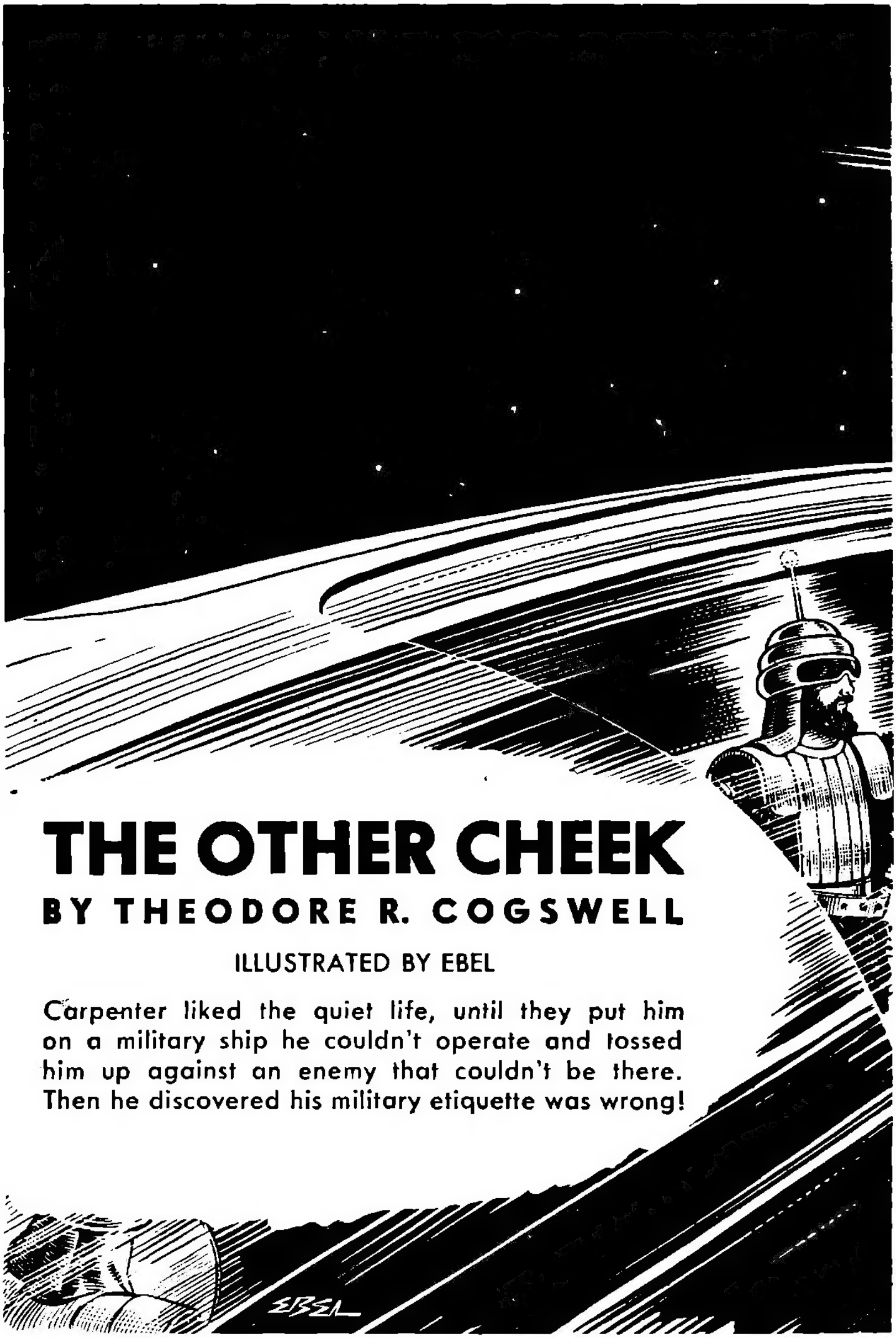
Girls are as welcome as men, incidentally; while fans are still more commonly male than otherwise, the clubs we've seen have had a pretty fair mixture in them.

Just as a passing thought, most of the stories in this issue are by fans, new and old. Unlike other fields of writing, science fiction is tough going for any writer who hasn't followed it for years. With the science fiction boom on, authors are turning from all other fields to science fiction—and then turning back wearily, because it takes something special here.

The few who have made the grade seem to wind up being more rabid fans than anyone else!

So—look up your nearest fan club, if you can find one. Send your buck to the Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention, after reading about the PSFS, and—if you belong to a club—let's hear about your group!

PHILIP ST. JOHN
Editor



THE OTHER CHEEK

BY THEODORE R. COGSWELL

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

Carpenter liked the quiet life, until they put him on a military ship he couldn't operate and tossed him up against an enemy that couldn't be there. Then he discovered his military etiquette was wrong!

All things being considered, Pilot Officer Kit Carpenter was as calm as a young and somewhat unwilling reserve officer who had never seen a planet blown up in anger could be expected to be when his ship was about to be blasted out from underneath him. His only outward sign of agitation was the way in which his eyes kept shifting back and forth as he tried to focus them simultaneously on the image of authority on his number one telescreen and the image of wrath on his number two. He was trying to consult the first about the second but he wasn't getting very far.

"Can't hear you, sir," he bellowed to the figure on the first screen.

Commander Simmons' voice sounded back faintly through the surrounding din. "Turn off your hooter, you knucklehead!"

Kit gave an abashed start and punched a stud on the control board in front of him. The raucous *beep BLOOP beep BLOOP* of the alarm siren that had been echoing through the deserted companionways and empty compartments of the old freighter dwindled to a last despairing squawk and silence.

"Well?" said the commander sourly. He obviously wasn't happy about wasting his time.

"WCD! Six o'clock at thirty-seven degrees. What do I do now?"

There was a moment of silence and then Commander Simmons snorted.

"The first thing you can do is to familiarize yourself with your code book. For your information, WCD means 'enemy spacecraft preparing to attack.' When you've checked that, you might also take a look at your *Officer's Guide* and brief yourself on the proper way to report to a superior officer!"

"Sorry, sir," said Kit, "but I thought . . ."

"Pilot officers aren't supposed to think," growled the other. "They're supposed to pilot. Now if it's not asking too much—your name, ship, and destination!"

Kit was trying desperately to sit at attention, but in spite of his best efforts, he couldn't keep his eyes off the other telescreen.

"When you're being addressed by a superior," the commander continued, "look him square in the face. The service has no place for shifty-eyed officers. Now report!"

"Pilot Officer Kit Carpenter, sir. Auxiliary freighter *Pelican* on courier detail. I'm supposed to rendezvous with a guard squadron some place around here and continue on to Saar with

them. I've a pouch for Space Marshall Kincaide."

"That's better," said the commander. "We're the outfit you're looking for. Now what's your trouble? It better be serious enough to justify that all-channel alarm you just blatted out or you're going to find yourself on report."

"WCD," said Kit. "Begging your pardon, sir, but there *is* an enemy spacecraft preparing to attack."

The commander jerked himself erect in his seat. "What!" He swung as if to bark an order and then caught himself and looked back at Kit with a dubious expression on his face.

"Are you sure you aren't seeing things? Let's have a look at what's out there."

After a moment's fumbling Kit managed to swing his number two plate around on its gimbals so the commander could see it.

"There she is, sir. She must have on her battle black because all that comes through on visual is a big blur."

Commander Simmons sighed and relaxed in his seat. "Sorry to disappoint you, Carpenter, but it would take a star class cruiser to throw a smudge that size. And star class cruisers don't go around jumping on auxiliary freighters. What do you get on your radar scope? Battle black won't soak up UHF."

Kit squirmed unhappily. "Nothing, sir. But . . ." Kit stammered to an embarrassed stop.

"Stop stuttering! What's the matter, your scanner out of kilter?"

"Not exactly . . ." The words came out in a rush. "The truth is that I just don't know how to operate the darn thing. I missed that lecture when I was taking basic."

"You what?" howled the commander.

Kit's look of embarrassment was becoming chronic. "You see, Commander, I'm a Planetary Ferry Command service pilot and . . ."

Simmons clapped his hands dramatically to his head. "Oh, no! Are they going crazy back home? What's a peefee doing out in deep space?"

"Couldn't we go into that later, sir? I'm about to be blown apart."

"Stop that nonsense!" snapped the commander. "When a superior officer asks you a question, you will give him a direct answer."

Kit looked unhappily at the blur on his other screen. "This was a rush job and there weren't any fleet pilots available so they punched out a navigation tape for me and sent me out on full

automatic. They said once I made contact with you, you'd take me in the rest of the way. I came out of warp ten minutes ago and this baby jumped me. I've got three minutes to surrender or else."

"For your information," said the commander with a strained sweetness in his voice, "ships of one system do not attack ships of another without a prior declaration of war. We are not at war. Do I make myself clear? You've probably got a bug in your detection gear that's throwing a shadow on your screen."

"Commander," said Kit doggedly, "maybe we aren't at war with anybody, but somebody is sure at war with us. Or with me anyway. Fouled up detectors don't talk. Whatever it is that's out there does. If I don't surrender within the next couple of minutes she's going to open fire!"

On the innermost planet of the system of Saar, the hundred and twenty-seventh consecutive meeting of the respective liberation forces of the Solar Alliance and the Polarian Empire were under way. In one tent Space Marshall Kincaide, Supreme Commander, Solar Expeditionary Forces, and His Royal Highness, Prince Tarz, Duke of the Outer Marches and War Lord of the Imperial Polarian Fleet, had passed from the table thumping stage and were now busily engaged in trying to outshout each other. Off in one corner by himself, his usual dignity completely surrendered, sat the unhappy representative of the Saarians, his eyes closed and his hands pressed tightly against his ears. As usual, nobody was paying him the slightest attention.

Two tents down, the sub-commission on the exchange of civilian prisoners was in full session. Since there were no civilian prisoners to be exchanged, they were passing time by showing each other pictures of wives and fiancées. Both Terrestrials and Polarians were finding the exchange rather stimulating because, though female anatomical structure was the same in both systems, ideas as to which areas of the body should be clothed as a matter of natural modesty varied greatly.

Back of the cookhouse a couple of privates were shooting craps. The Earthman had already taken over the Polarian's *thurk* skin and was busy working on his green battle beard. The dice weren't loaded, but they were a little flat on one side.

Squadron Commander Simmons knew that Kit couldn't be in any real trouble, but he found

himself wishing half consciously that he were. The commander was facing technological unemployment and he wasn't happy about it. He had a vested interest in the coming war—and now the coming war wasn't coming. Once the stellite deposits on Saar—which, as everyone agreed, the Saarians had little use for, having no expensive battle fleet to maintain—were equitably divided between Earth and Polarius, there would no longer be any necessity for a show of force, and the reserve components of the Solar Fleet would be demobilized.

Squadron Commander Simmons' permanent rank was Pilot Officer, Senior Grade, and he wasn't particularly anxious to return to it. He ran his fingers regretfully over the golden comets on his shoulder straps. This was his last mission. Negotiations for an agreement whereby the Saarians would turn over part of their stellite to Earth for protection against the Polarians and the remainder to the Polarians for protection against the Solar Alliance were almost completed. Escorting Space Marshall Kincaide back to Earth would be his last flight as commander. After that . . . His fingers were creeping up to the golden comets again when a crisp voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"Word from the spotting room, sir. They swept the courier and there *is* a ship alongside her. A big one! She looks like a Polarian star class cruiser, commander. Her nose turrets show up plain as day!"

Simmons' fist crashed down on the general alarm button. "All hands to battle stations! Prepare to proceed under full emergency power! You!" he barked at Kit. "Make a run for it. Throw on your boosters and take evasive action! We'll get to you as fast as we can."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Kit, "but before I took off they gave me strict orders not to touch the controls. Said I'd get lost for sure if I started fooling around with them."

"I don't give a damn what they said," roared the commander. "I'm giving you a direct order to make a run for it. And above all, don't let that pouch fall into enemy hands. If it looks as if you aren't going to get clear, destroy it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. But about that pouch . . ."

"Carry on," snapped Simmons. The screen went dark. Kit looked up unhappily at the sweeping second hand of the clock above the instrument panel and prepared to obey orders, to his best ability.

Squadron 7 hurtled through the gray nothingness of hyperspace in a tight cone. In the lead ship Commander Simmons sat hunched before his blank combat screen, battle ready, his fingers spread over the controls that bound the whole squadron together into a flashing thunderbolt of destruction.

A flat mechanical voice echoed from the concealed speaker behind him.

"Request permission to snap out, sir."

Without turning his head, Simmons grunted, "Permission granted." There was a sudden wrenching and then the combat screen lit up as the squadron flipped into normal space. There was the usual exasperating moment of waiting for the detector beams to bridge the distance to the objective and back, and then two sharp silhouettes leaped into being. Simmons' executive officer pointed excitedly at the larger of the two.

"It's a Polarian all right, sir!"

Simmons nodded tensely.

As the squadron closed in, the smaller silhouette began to move rapidly away from the larger one, zig-zagging as it went.

"He's making a run for it!"

For a moment it looked as if the courier might make it. Then with an easy twist like a shark pursuing a mud turtle, the larger silhouette overtook the smaller one.

Suddenly the battle screen began to shimmer. Action was lost in a spreading cloud of light points. Commander Simmons punched the spotting room call button.

"What the hell's going on down there?"

An apologetic voice answered. "The big ship's jamming, sir. There's nothing we can do until we get within range of the visuals."

Minutes went by and still the screen remained blank. Then suddenly it cleared and the two ships could be seen again. There was little change in their positions. Then again the little ship changed course suddenly and began to pull away. The cruiser made no effort to follow.

"Two minutes to target, sir," called a voice from the wall speaker.

The courier drew farther and farther away. Commander Simmons was just beginning to relax when without warning from the nose of the great cruiser darted a flashing speck.

"There's a homing torp after him!"

The courier seemed to realize its danger and began to take evasive action but the tiny point

kept on its trail, closing in with relentless persistency.

A second later the two points touched. A blinding burst of actinic light flared up on the screen and then nothing was left but a glowing spreading cloud of radioactive gas.

The enemy cruiser hung motionless for a moment and then with a flick, vanished as its great converters warped it into hyperspace.

Commander Simmons' comets seemed to grip his shoulder tabs as if they had a permanent place there.

"Set course for Saar! If it's war they want, war is what they will get!"

He adjusted his look of command and glared sternly around at such of his staff as were on duty in the control room.

"Gentlemen, it may take twenty years, but the *Pelican* will be avenged!" He frowned as he detected a certain lack of enthusiasm in the "Aye, aye, sirs" with which the more civilian-hearted members of his staff responded.

"Service before Self," he barked, and then, chest out, shoulders back, and chin in, he marched from the control room.

On Saar negotiations were proceeding as usual. Prince Tarz and Space Marshall Kincaide were glaring at each other in sullen silence while the Saarian emissary fidgeted forgotten at the end of the table. Finally the little man spoke in a quiet voice.

"Please, gentlemen, you know how these scenes upset me. Couldn't we adjourn until you are in a better frame of mind?"

Kincaide looked down at him in disgust.

"If you're not happy here, why don't you go home? We'll send word to you when it's time for you to come back and sign the treaty."

Prince Tarz nodded. It was the first time he and Kincaide had agreed upon anything for days.

"Let's get back to work," grunted Kincaide impatiently. He pulled a topographical map of the northern hemisphere toward him and indicated an irregular area marked in red.

"My government contends that . . ."

The Saarian interrupted for the second time. "That area contains some of our best grazing land!"

Prince Tarz gave a wolfish grin. "It is unfortunate, but think of the protection you'll be getting. If anyone ever tries to bother you, we'll drive them out. I don't see any way that occupation can be avoided—unless of course you'd prefer to detail a couple of your own battalions for defense detail."

"You know that we have no troops," said the Saarian with dignity.

Tarz winked at Kincaide. "Then draft a few."

The litfle man caught the exchange of amused looks.

"You find it amusing that our culture is such that my people are incapable of any act of true violence, don't you? This is not a matter for laughter, but for thought. I have warned you before that if you insist on thrusting yourselves upon us, terrible consequences must follow. On your heads be it, then."

"Nuts!" said Kincaide. Turning back to Tarz he stabbed his finger down on the map and protested violently.

As voices began to rise again, the Saarian shuddered and slipped down in his chair. He didn't think they would come to the point of actually striking each other, but even the threat of violence nauseated him.

Kit did the best he could but his best wasn't good enough. Trying to carry on evasive action in an old clunker whose worn plates begin to buckle at a 5G side-thrust is a rather pointless procedure. His run for it lasted exactly fifteen seconds. Then, with an effortless spurt of its great planetary drives, the cruiser flashed up to his side and gripped the *Pelican* securely with her magnagravs. As he was hauled closer to the great ship, he followed out the last of his orders. The sealed package addressed to Space Marshall Kincaide was tossed regretfully into the incinerator chute.

Kit wasn't happy about being captured but there didn't seem to be much he could do about it so, after switching his number two screen to BOW CLOSE so he could see what was going on, he busied himself with collecting his few belongings in his flight bag.

Lovingly he took down a framed photo from the bulkhead and gazed regretfully upon his past greatness. There next to a small shed that bore a very large sign, AJAX CARRIERS, rested the Ajax fleet, an old flare-jetted DeWitt open-system lunar cargo rocket. Beside its open cargo hatch stood the Ajax staff, owner and chief pilot Kittridge Carpenter, and his chief of maintenance and supply, Egghead Shirey, who in addition to being the mechanic, kept the books, collected the bills, and loaded and unloaded the ship.

Kit sighed as he placed the picture gently in his bag. Egghead was doing all he could to keep the business running but he couldn't swing it alone. It would take Kit's presence and a fistfull of money to get the Ajax Car-

riers back off the rocks. And now —Kit stared gloomily at the telescreen.

The cruiser's midship landing hatch was gaping open, but the man at the magnagrav controls seemed to be having trouble estimating relative speeds. At last after several false swings the *Pelican* was jockeyed in through the landing hatch and lowered roughly to the hangar floor.

A clanging vibration ran through the deck plates of the cruiser and up into his ship as the great entrance hatch clanged shut. And then his vision screen went blank as air hissed into the hanger compartment and frosted over the scanner ports. Kit sat watching the external pressure needle climb until it reached Earth normal. When it did, he climbed down into the pressure chamber and undogged the locks on the outside port. There did not seem any point in hanging around. The actual surrender was only a formality that he might as well get over with. When he stuck his head out the hatch and looked down, he almost changed his mind.

Waiting for Kit on the flight deck were several unsavory-looking characters clumped together in a disorderly knot. Over their massive shoulders were slung tawny *thurk* skins, and partially covering the stubble on their scowling, unshaven faces hung the false green beards that were the traditional battle wear of Polarian fighting men. As Kit started down the ladder that led from the exit hatch of the *Pelican*, they began to howl up at him. They carried a miscellaneous assortment of blunt objects in their hands and seemed intent on making as immediate and forceful a presentation of them as possible. Kit scurried back through his memory trying to pick up something in the way of a guide to survival. There had been a training film on *What To Do If Captured*—but the only thing he could remember from it was that it was highly important that one reveal nothing more to the enemy than his name, rank, and serial number. Unfortunately, the menacing crowd down below seemed more interested in collecting blood than information.

He was tempted to reverse his direction but a moment's reflection convinced him that forcing them to cut their way into the *Pelican* to get him wouldn't improve their tempers. Somewhat whitefaced, he continued on down to the deck, raising both hands above his head in token of surrender.

The green-bearded warriors closed around him in a mutter-

ing semicircle. Kit licked his lips nervously and fumbled behind his back for the first rung of the ladder. He tensed, ready for a quick pivot and a fast scramble, when a massive officer pushed his way through the ranks and came to a stop in front of him.

The bright green ringlets of the ceremonial beard that draped the lower half of his face only half concealed the three days' growth of stubble underneath. His tunic was smudged with food stains and his bloodshot eyes had a mean and crazy look in them as they eyed Kit with the intentness of a hound dog surveying a chunk of raw meat. Kit felt an immediate and pressing need to talk things over. He wracked his brain in an effort to salvage something of the two weeks course in *extra-terrestrial*, the *lingua franca* of the spaceways, he'd had at OCS, but all he could remember was *pigna sna krutvik*, 'have you lost your toothbrush.' Considering the condition of the other's teeth, it hardly seemed like a politic question.

With a scowl, the officer gestured to the blaster that hung at Kit's side and barked, "Therka!" Kit meekly unbuckled it and handed it over, butt first as the regulations provided. The other gripped the heavy weapon and with an ugly chuckle raised it up until it was aligned with a point roughly one inch above Kit's snubbed nose. The landing area grew suddenly silent as one grimy finger began to crook down on the firing stud. The officer's eyes narrowed as he slowly began to count, "Urp! . . . Det! . . . Twik! . . ."

Kit's lesson in Polarian numerals was suddenly interrupted by the dissonant clang of a gong. Then it sounded again, and from the other side of the hangar deck came a procession of white robed figures. Their leader was a slight elderly man but the wand he bore impressively before him had an unpleasant resemblance to a human thigh bone. He stopped a short distance from Kit and addressed the warriors briefly. They responded with short snarls of protest and then reluctantly began to struggle away from the landing area. Only the officer remained.

"I am the Soother of Souls. The position is somewhat equivalent to that of chief chaplain in your forces. It's a bit messier, though. When we sacrifice a captive, I have to examine his entrails to see whether Thweela is kindly disposed toward our venture."

Kit gulped and changed the subject in a hurry.

"What's behind all this? One minute I'm cruising along minding my own business, and the next I'm the prisoner of a bunch of loonies whose only interest in life seems to be finding newer and more interesting ways to beat my brains out. What gives?"

"You're an Earthman," said the Soother of Souls, as if that explained everything.

"So what?"

"Earth always takes! She masses her fleets off a little system, points her guns, and takes. I think maybe Polarius will change things. She's got big ships--big guns too. Thweela will drink much blood soon!"

"Why pick on me?" protested Kit. "I'm not mad at anybody. All that I want to do is get home before my business goes bankrupt. What have you got to gain by taking me prisoner?"

"You'll find out," said the Soother of Souls cryptically and then turned as the officer beside him tugged at his sleeve, gestured toward Kit, and growled something.

"What does he want?" asked Kit nervously.

"Captain Klag says he's leaving now. He says he'll see you at dinner."

"Tell him I'm not hungry."

"That's irrelevant. You are the dinner. The ritual banquet is an old Polarian custom. By eating the enemy we rob him of his power. A long time ago we used to use a spit and roast him over a fire. Now we use diathermy so as not to spoil so much meat."

As Kit's face went white, Captain Klag gave a satisfied smile and swaggered away. The high priest barked a quick command and suddenly the hangar deck became a hive of activity as his followers tossed their robes to one side and went efficiently to work.

A cart was trundled up carrying what Kit recognized as some sort of remote control rig. Four of the priests grabbed it and quickly muscled it up the ladder and into the hatch of the *Pelican*. They remained inside for several minutes, and then one stuck his head out and nodded to the high priest. A moment later all four came out of the ship and closed the hatch behind them.

While the first crew was working inside the *Pelican*, another had trundled out a space torpedo and was busy arming its atomic warhead and adjusting its homing controls. They set it carefully on the guide rails that lead to the exit hatch and then, after a careful check, waved a go-ahead signal to the high priest. He called a quick order. Robes were reassumed, the procession reformed, and, with a bang of the

ceremonial gong, double-timed toward the entrance port that led to the interior of the ship. Kit brought up the rear, assisted by two husky priests.

As the hatch banged shut behind them, Kit stole a glance back through the transparent port. The *Pelican* rose slowly from the deck and with a short spurt from her rear jets vanished through the exit hatch into the blackness of outer space. A moment later the homing torp vibrated slightly and began to move slowly in pursuit.

It was pitch dark in the cell block. Kit slumped on the iron ledge that served him for a bunk and tried to estimate how long it had been since they had brought him down from the flight deck and locked him up. On the way down there had been the muffled thunder of drive tubes and then, just as they clanged the grilled door shut on him, the familiar wrenching as the cruiser twisted into hyperspace.

His stomach was his clock and for obvious reasons he tried to avoid thinking about any part of the eating process. Being a prisoner of war under normal circumstances was bad enough, but to be the *pièce de résistance* at a ritual banquet was a course of another color. *What* he had to do was obvious; it was the *how* that was putting pinwheels in his brain. There were scout ships on the landing stage, but to get to them he would first have to get out of the cell. And then, even if he could slip down to the flight deck undetected, there was still the problem of getting the launching port open so he could blast out.

The only thing he knew for sure was that he had to get out, and he had to get out fast.

Suddenly a dim light blinked on overhead and he heard the sound of a hatch opening at the other end of the cell block. There was the sound of footsteps and a moment later he could distinguish an approaching figure in the semi-darkness. It stopped in front of his cell and looked in.

Kit glanced down at the gleaming, sharp battle sickle that hung at the other's side. A horrifying suspicion grew that this could very well be the ship's butcher come to prepare him for dinner. Drawing his shoulders back, he said in a voice whose sternness was somewhat spoiled by a slight quaver, "I am an officer in the Solar Fleet and I demand to be treated as such. Interspatial law provides extreme penalties for the mistreatment of prisoners!"

The other answered his protest by hoisting up the broad, flat tail of the *thurk* skin that

was draped over his left shoulder and blowing his nose on it noisily.

When he made no overt move Kit advanced to the front of his cell, tapped himself on the chest, and said slowly, "Me Earth," and pointing toward the other, "You Polarius. Friends." Then he stretched his hand out through the bars, "Shake."

The warrior looked at him coldly. "Regulations of the Polarian Imperial Fleet provide that all personnel refrain from unauthorized physical contact with prisoners. You are a prisoner. Shaking hands with you would be unauthorized physical contact. During my current avatar I am appearing in the physical guise of a Polarian officer. Do I make myself clear?"

He was smug about it.

Kit withdrew his hand. "Not quite. Would you mind going over that 'current avatar' part again?"

"You may substitute the terms 'embodiment' or 'manifestation' if you prefer," said the other stiffly. "Regulations also provide that guards shall not carry on unnecessary conversations with prisoners. This conversation is unnecessary." With that he turned his back to Kit.

Kit was bothered. There was something about the whole situation that was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Why should the Polarians want to break the peace? And if they did, why did they tip their hand by knocking off an old clunker like the *Pelican?* And above all, why did they go to all the trouble of taking him prisoner? He certainly didn't know anything that would be of value to them. It didn't make sense! Nothing made sense—including the position of the guard who was now leaning against the bars with his back toward Kit so that the bunch of keys protruding from his back pocket were within easy reach.

Without stopping to think, Kit stretched out his hand cautiously. His fingers had almost touched the key ring when the guard gave a sudden bound like a frightened rabbit and then lurched into the opposite corridor wall.

As Kit watched him his eyes turned glassy and rolled up slightly. He stood rigid, head half-cocked as if listening to inaudible voices.

"Do you hear them?" he demanded.

Kit shook his head cautiously. "Who?"

"The voices. The voices that are one voice." The guard's voice dropped into a rumbling chant. "The voices that cry out through

the empty blackness between the stars."

Kit shifted uneasily. He couldn't get at the guard, but the guard could get at him.

"The rabbits have gathered in their warrens. They are summoning death, cold wracking death streaming in from the dark nebula. The millions are kneeling together, their minds throbbing out a single cry . . . over and over . . . over and over . . . Come Thweela . . . COME THWEELA!"

He pressed both hands against his head and began to shake and tremble. His eyeballs turned up until only the muddy whites could be seen and he seemed to be choking on his own tongue. He pushed back against the bulkhead, spreading his arms out. His head lolled down on his chest and in the half darkness it almost seemed as if he hung there crucified.

Kit felt surge after surge of alarm as he watched the guard. Thweela? Thweela was the old Polarian god of death and destruction. But this!

There was silence for a moment and then a strangled sob burst from the guard's throat.

"Not the Death! Let me live out this avatar in peace!"

He stood as if waiting for an answer. When it came his massive chest expanded as his shoulders squared and his head came up. Like a great automaton he stalked slowly, majestically toward Kit.

High above the liberators' headquarters on Saar there were brilliant bursts of purple flame as Squadron 7 entered atmosphere with braking jets roaring out their full-throated thunder. Commander Simmons was in his stateroom checking over his full dress uniform for the umpteenth time. When he was quite satisfied he stiffened, adjusted his face to a maximum of sternness, and said briskly to his mirror, "At 0748 this morning a WCD was received from the auxiliary freighter *Pelican* . . ."

Kit retreated rapidly to the rear of the cell and looked around desperately for something he could use as a weapon. There wasn't anything. Realizing the hollowness of the gesture, he cocked his fists and assumed what he hoped was a defensive position. A roaring contemptuous laugh came from the guard.

"You dare raise your hands against Thweela the Mighty?"

Kit's fists and jaw dropped at the same time.

"Thweela?"

The guard nodded majestically. "I have selected this body for my purposes," he said.

Even though Kit carried a rabbit's foot in his pocket, he had always vaguely considered himself an agnostic. As a result he wasn't quite sure how one was supposed to behave in the presence of a god—but he did the best he could. Trying to keep thought one step ahead of action, he flopped down on his knees and stretched out his arms.

"My Lord!"

"You know me then?" A terrible light shone in Thweela's eyes as he glared through the bars at the Earthman.

"There is but one Thweela and Carpenter is his prophet."

The guard's expression of wrath changed to one of doubt.

"Thou art somewhat flat-chested to be the chosen sword of Thweela." There was a moment of pregnant silence. "But so be it. Thou shalt stand at our right hand and be our sword and buckler."

Kit knocked his head three times against the deck plates in acknowledgment of his gratitude.

"Have I my lord's permission to rise?"

Taking silence for assent Kit hoisted himself to his feet. A vague plan was beginning to form in the back of his mind.

"Will not my lord now reveal himself to the others on this ship so that they too may worship him?" he pleaded.

A grim smile played over Thweela's face and his hand dropped to caress his battle sickle.

"They shall know me in my time and in my fashion."

Kit had a feeling it was now or never. Trying to keep from sounding too concerned, he asked, "Would it not be well for the Prophet of Thweela to go before and prepare his people to greet him? It is not well that a god should go forth unannounced."

The other considered the suggestion gravely and then nodded. Taking the keys that dangled from his back pocket, he produced a small glowing sliver of metal and inserted it in the lock. There was a click and the cell door swung open. Kit slipped out quickly and bowed.

"If my lord will wait here, I will go ahead and assemble the ship's company to do him homage."

Thweela shook his head. "My mission brooks no waiting!"

Kit made another quick try. "May I suggest then that we proceed at once to the flight deck. There is space there sufficient for grouping all those who will assemble to hear thy words."

He waited, taut. Finally there was a majestic nod of assent.

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Three minutes later he was half way to the flight deck. He

kept two steps behind the guard, trying to look as much as possible like a prisoner being conducted some place on official business. Several green bearded warriors passed, but none gave the pair more than casual attention.

With the occasional white-robed priest that went by, the situation was somewhat different. It seemed to Kit that they recognized him but for some reason or other wanted to give him the impression that they didn't. There was something fishy about the whole business. Things were going too smoothly. Then, suddenly, everything blew up in his face.

As he turned into a narrow passageway that looked as if it might lead to the flight deck, he saw a noisy procession advancing toward him. As it drew nearer, he saw it was headed by a familiar figure. It was Captain Klag, the officer who had threatened to blow his head off. He was still wearing Kit's blaster. Behind him came several warriors who were beating out a cacophonous march on an odd assortment of pots and pans. It occurred to Kit that they might be celebrating the coming banquet, and he pressed against the corridor wall to get out of their way. Head averted, he started to sidle by the group. For a moment he thought he was going to make it, but just as he was almost past them, a harsh voice bawled in his ear and a rough hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Kit decided not to answer on ground that it might incriminate him and turned to Thweela for assistance. The guard wasn't there. He was thirty feet down the corridor, leaning against a bulkhead and shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Lord Thweela," shouted Kit, "this person is trying to interfere with our mission."

The warrior who was holding Kit started to laugh. "That's not Thweela. Sometimes he thinks he is, but the real God is with us!" He pointed triumphantly to Klag.

"Behold the god of death and destruction!"

The towering figure of Klag stalked forward with the intentness of a panther preparing to pounce upon a rabbit. The men behind him began to inch in until Kit found himself penned back against the cold steel of the corridor wall by a menacing human bulwark.

A tremor ran through the crowd, a ripple of hostility that grew in intensity until it hung over him like a tidal wave. As it started to break, he saw a white-

robed figure trying to force its way through the crowd to him.

The new Thweela shoved his ugly face close to Kit's, cleared his throat and changed the course of Terrestrial history.

Pilot Officer Carpenter was a peace loving citizen who enjoyed nothing more than avoiding a good brawl, but there are certain insults that no normal human male can accept. When the small savage that lurks within all of us saw what the warrior was preparing to do, it seized control. Raw impulse pulsed down Kit's neurons and he suddenly exploded into an awkward pistoning of arms and legs. By luck more than design, one fist smashed into a scowling bearded face. The result was chaos.

Warriors went hooting and screaming in all directions. In a moment only the priest was left and even he seemed to be on the verge of becoming violently sick to his stomach.

"Barbarian!" he choked. "Madman! You hit him! You struck another entity! You—" His words choked off as matter momentarily triumphed over mind and his stomach broke out in open rebellion.

Kit left him gagging in a corner and started down the corridor. His knuckles were sore but there was an uncommon erectness to his carriage. Green bearded warriors peeped timidly out at him from side passageways, but none of them came near.

On Saar negotiations had skidded to a sudden halt. In spite of the strain imposed by keeping a thirty-eight inch waist sucked in so that it approximated a regulation thirty-two, Squadron Commander Simmons was completing a report that was a model of military crispness.

". . . and at 0813 galactic time our courier again took evasive action. The Polarian cruiser launched a homing torpedo which completely destroyed it. We came in to attack, but the cruiser flipped into hyper-space and disappeared."

Prince Tarz pounded his fist on the table angrily. "I tell you again it's impossible. All our units have received strict orders to observe the peace."

"You are sure that the cruiser was Polarian?" asked Space Marshall Kincaide.

"No doubt about it, sir," answered Simmons. "They are the only ones that have their front blasters mounted in ball turrets."

Kincaide's face was white with anger as he turned to Prince Tarz. "I think you have some explaining to do."

"I have already said that all our units were under orders to refrain from any hostile acts," said Tarz. "Polarian spacemen do not disobey orders. Your man is obviously mistaken."

Kincaide rose slowly to his feet. "The squadron commander is not mistaken!" He pointed to a folder of documents on the table. "There is the evidence. Sworn statements of other crew members. Photographs of your ship. Examine it, sir."

Prince Tarz brushed the pile of documents aside contemptuously. "It is not necessary to examine them." His voice was frosty. "The word of a Polarian officer is sufficient in itself!"

Kincaide's voice carried an equal chill. "In this case we shall have to insist on something a little more substantial."

Prince Tarz' face tightened, and he came slowly to his feet. With an angry shake of his shoulders he shrugged his *thark* skin to one side, exposing his gleaming battle sickle.

"I trust I misunderstand you, sir." His hand dropped to the hilt of his curved blade. "Though we wear these for tradition's sake, we have not forgotten how to use them!"

There was open anger in the space marshall's voice as he said slowly, "In the face of evidence, my government will require more than the word of a barbarian—even though it is backed by the weapons of a barbarian."

As the Polarian's blade hissed out of its scabbard, the Saarian emissary gave a horrified gasp and fainted.

"Barbarian, is it! My ancestors were blazing the starways when yours were still crawling around in the mud of your stinking planet. And by Thweela, if it's war you want, we'll beat you back so deep into that same mud that you'll never dare brave space again!"

The Saarian had by now revived and was forcing himself to watch. Tarz suddenly caught himself and bowed formally.

"My apologies, sir. In my anger I forgot that we were meeting under a flag of truce. Unless you wish to apologize, I suggest that we continue this beyond planetary limits."

Kincaide bowed with equal formality. "It will be a pleasure, sir." He turned to his executive officer who was standing by with jaw hanging. "Give orders for immediate embarkation of all personnel. We are leaving Saar."

"But Marshall," protested the other, "what about our business here?"

"File it under 'unfinished'," snapped Kincaide. "Right now we've got a war to fight."

At the word "war", Com-

mander Simmons brightened perceptibly. So, oddly enough, did the Saarian emissary.

Space Marshall Kincaide was packing his personal gear when an orderly entered.

"Beg pardon, sir, but there's a pilot officer outside who insists on seeing you. He says he's captured a battle cruiser and wants to know what you want him to do with it."

Kincaide stopped pacing.

"He what?"

"He wants to know what he's supposed to do with it," repeated the orderly stolidly.

Kincaide exploded. "Tell him he can take it and . . . No, send him in here. I'll teach him to play games at a time like this."

A moment later Kit entered and gave an awkward salute. Before Kincaide could say anything, Simmons gave a gasp of amazed recognition.

"Marshall! This is the officer who was captured by the Polarians!" He slapped Kit on the back. "Good boy! How did you manage to escape?"

"It wasn't difficult once I figured what they were up to," said Kit. "They had me locked up for a while and they said they were going to eat me, so I convinced the guard that I was his prophet and he let me out and . . ."

"Just a second," said Kincaide. "I'm lost already. Whose prophet?"

"Thweela's sir. He's the Polarian god of violent death and destruction. And then we ran into another fellow who was Thweela, too, so there was a sort of mix-up until I took my gun away from him and took over the ship. I figured I'd better get here in a hurry and stop the war before it had a chance to really get started, so I smashed the cruiser's main drive and left it hanging out there."

"Just a second," said Kincaide. "Are you trying to tell me you took over a star class cruiser armed only with a blaster?"

Kit shook his head. "I used a much more effective weapon. You see, sir, they really weren't Polarians even if they were wearing green beards. The whole thing was just a plot to make me think they were so that when I escaped . . ."

"Let me get this clear," said Kincaide. "You say that everybody on the ship was plotting against you?"

"Yes, sir. But it wasn't just me."

Kincaide turned to Simmons. "Are you sure that this is the pilot of the ship that was destroyed by the Polarians?"

"No question about it, sir."

A look of compassion came

into Kincaide's eyes. "Poor devil! They must have used a psychoprobe on him and cracked him wide open. You'd better have him taken over to the psychcorpsmen. If his brain isn't damaged too much, they may be able to bring him around enough to find out how he managed to escape." His voice became hard. "Tarz is going to pay for this!"

"You've got it all wrong," protested Kit. "They didn't hurt me at all. And they weren't Polarians. They just thought they were. They were really Saarians."

"That's right," said Kincaide soothingly. "You captured a cruiser with a secret weapon and it was full of Saarians who thought they were Polarians."

"Not all of them," said Kit. "The priests knew what was up all the time because they weren't really priests, they just pretended to be."

Simmons beckoned to the orderly. He came up and took Kit by the arm.

"You've had a rough time, boy," said Kincaide, "but we're going to take care of you. You just go along with the orderly and everything will be all right."

"But, sir, you haven't heard the whole story."

"We'll talk about it when you feel better."

Before Kit could say anything more, he was propelled vigorously out of the tent by the orderly.

As soon as Kincaide's indignation drained away, a feeling of uncertainty began to take its place. He looked across the table at Commander Simmons and then down at the damning pile of documents. He couldn't be wrong. But yet he had never known a Polarian officer to tell a lie. He began to wonder how to best break the news to the Solar Alliance that he had managed to involve Earth in a large scale war. Then he thought of what had been done to Kit. He was starting to get angry all over again when, without pausing to have himself announced, Prince Tarz stormed into the tent.

"Will you step outside? There is a matter of personal honor to be settled."

Kincaide had an unhappy feeling that he was going to have to eat his words about barbarian weapons. Prince Tarz had handled the side arm that tradition required him to wear with an air of familiar competence. An equally traditional and equally anachronistic weapon hung at Kincaide's side. The only trouble was that he hadn't the slightest idea how one went about using it. Damning the custom that required flag rank officers to wear

sabers rather than blasters, he stepped out into the bright sunshine.

In front of the tent stood an Earthman, surrounded by an angry group of Polarian officers. Tarz stabbed a stiff forefinger at him. "This . . ." His voice shook. "This *person* has subjected Phalanx Leader Der to an insult so terrible that it can only be wiped out with blood!"

"Why inform me," said Kincaide stiffly. "My men are perfectly competent to conduct their own affairs of honor."

"Your man said he can't accept the challenge until you give your permission."

"*My* permission?" said Kincaide in amazement. "Here, let me talk to him." He shouldered his way through the crowd with Commander Simmons at his heels.

"What kind of nonsense is . . ." His voice suddenly trailed off. "OH, NO! Not you again! Didn't I order you sent to the psychcorpsman for observation?"

Kit saluted respectfully and nodded.

Kincaide snorted in disgust and turned to Prince Tarz. "Much as I dislike it, this is one case where I'm going to have to interfere. I can't let this man fight, he's mentally unbalanced."

Prince Tarz looked at Kit skeptically. "He looks all right to me."

"He's suffering from delusions of grandeur," explained Kincaide. "He was the pilot of the courier that was blasted by your cruiser. He was captured somehow and later escaped. The poor fellow's mind cracked during his ordeal. He believes that he captured your cruiser with his bare hands and took it as a prize of war. He's obviously unfit for combat."

Prince Tarz' disbelief was obvious. "Since no Polarian ship has been involved in an incident with one of your fleet units, this man could not have been captured. Since he could not have been captured, you are obviously lying to protect him."

It was Kincaide's turn to have his face whiten.

"You are calling me a liar, sir?"

"I am calling you a liar, sir."

"In that case may I suggest that two fighters be made ready at once. I will met you at sunset at eighty thousand feet."

Prince Tarz saluted stilly, made an abrupt about face, and started away, his officers following close at his heels.

The gap between the two groups widened for a moment and then suddenly a slight figure

bolted from the Earthman's ranks. It was Kit.

He was yelling hotly.

"Prince Tarz! Prince Tarz! Wait up! I can explain everything." He heard Kincaide's angry voice behind him, "Corpsman, place that man under restraint!" Grabbing hold of the Prince's arm desperately, Kit swung him half around.

"Sir, you've got to listen to me. It was a Saarian ship that captured me. They're trying to get us to fight each other!"

Tarz gave him a look usually reserved for small crawling things and brushed his hand away.

Kit's Adam's apple jerked convulsively as he swallowed twice and then suddenly jerked his blaster from its holster and jammed it into Prince Tarz' midriff. A gasp of horror went up from both parties.

Kit's voice shook. "I'm a peace loving citizen and I'm not going to sit back and let myself get sucked into a war that has no point. I've got something to say and I'm going to be listened to or else!" Kit's voice wasn't the only thing that was shaking. His hand was trembling so badly that his trigger finger kept bouncing against the firing stud. Prince Tarz noticed it and felt a sudden urge to talk things over.

From the corner of his eye Kit saw Space Marshall Kincaide running toward him. "Stand back, sir," he yelled. "If you try to grab me, this thing might go off." Kincaide skidded to a sudden halt.

"Put that gun down, Carpenter. This is a truce site."

Kit's voice had steadied. "I'll put it down under one condition. You two have got to promise that you'll give me ten minutes to explain what's going on. After that I don't care what you do with me."

"Certainly not!" snapped Kincaide. "I refuse to be intimidated!"

"You refuse to be intimidated?" howled Prince Tarz. "Whose belly is that blaster sticking in, anyway? You can have your ten minutes," he said to Kit.

"No!" said Kincaide stubbornly.

"May I point to the consequences if I should be killed by a member of your forces on a truce site," said Tarz.

Kincaide thought about it for a moment and then reluctantly growled, "All right, ten minutes it is."

"I have complete freedom to do anything I want without interference?" asked Kit.

The two commanders nodded. With a shaky sigh of relief, Kit

shoved his blaster back in its holster.

"Good. Now follow me." With the two groups trailing behind him, he walked across the field to the six man scout in which he had arrived two hours before. Kit punched the release stud beneath the outer hatch of its entrance lock. A moment later the assembled officers gasped in amazement as two warriors wearing tremendous *thurk* pelts and gigantic green beards swaggered out into the bright sunlight.

"It can't be!" gasped Tarz.

Kit stepped back three paces, flopped down on his knees, and knocked his head against the earth three times. He was the only one aware that he had all his fingers crossed and was trying desperately to interlock his toes. Raising his head, he addressed a point half way between the two figures.

"Your pardon, Holyness, but would you deign to reveal which of these bodies is the vessel of thy terrible spirit? It would be unseemly if we gave homage to the wrong one, for is it not written, 'There is but one Thweela.' "

The two green bearded figures stepped forward as one god and proclaimed in unison, "I am Thweela."

Kit uncrossed his fingers.

"Lord, we cannot give worship until we know in truth which of thee is the true god of death and destruction. Let the true strike down the false that we may tremble before him."

A moment went by without response and then simultaneously the two figures sprang apart and faced each other in a half crouch. There was a flicker of light on steel and each held his glittering battle sickle ready. Slowly, light as jungle cats and as terrible to the sight, they circled each other warily until without warning, his lips spewing insults, one danced forward, his blade set for a midriff cut. The other dropped his guard and with an underhand swing, caught his opponent's sickle in the hook of his own. There was a moment's ferocious tugging as each sought to wrest away the other's weapon. They pulled closer until they were pressed chest to chest. Faces twisting horribly, they howled at each other. A thin white froth began to form on their lips.

Prince Tarz and Space Marshall Kincaide stood side by side watching the struggle in amazement, their differences momentarily forgotten. With the air of a ringmaster about to present the special feature attraction, Kit stepped up to them and saluted.

"By your leave, gentlemen."

Before either of them could answer, he stepped over to the two straining warriors and gripped each by the shoulder. With a sudden wrench he jerked them apart and swung them around so they both stood facing him. Then slowly and deliberately, he unhooked his gun belt and dropped both harness and blaster to the ground.

"Watch it, Carpenter," yelled Kincaide involuntarily. "They're battle-crazy. They'll split your skull if you interfere!"

Kit ignored him and suddenly, without warning, administered the supreme insult as with cold deliberation he spit first in the right eye of the warrior on his left, and then in the left eye of the warrior on his right. Then without waiting for either of them to react, he reached forward and grabbed hold of both their beards simultaneously. With a quick jerk he pulled them completely off and threw them to the ground. With the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he pointed to the bared faces.

"Observe, gentlemen. No chins."

Then, pulling his right hand in close to his chest so that it couldn't be seen by the groups behind him, he made a sudden gesture. The result was electric. Two shrieks of fright rang out and a second later all that could be seen of the two Thweelas were their backs as they scuttled in terror back into the scout.

Kit turned and displayed his clenched fist. "My secret weapon," he said modestly.

Space Marshall Kincaide fingered his lantern jaw and Prince Tarz rubbed his long pointed one. Then they went to look for the Saarian emissary who didn't have any chin at all.

". . . and so," Kit finally concluded, "the escape they had planned for me to make didn't come off. The way they had it set up, I was supposed to knock out the guard, take his keys, and escape in a scout that just happened to be standing by with its jets primed. My report on what they were planning to do with me would have made conflict inevitable. Fortunately Thweela moved in just at the right time."

An old and walrus-mustached staff officer harrumphed. "But spitting! Really, Carpenter, things like that just aren't done by gentlemen—not even temporary gentlemen!"

"I know," said Kit apologetically, "but you all thought I was crazy. I had to do something drastic to get you all to listen to me long enough for me to show what had happened."

Prince Tarz held up his hand

for silence. "I'm still confused. For one thing, the crew of that cruiser carried side arms. A Saarian not only couldn't carry a weapon, he'd get sick at his stomach at the sight of one."

"A normal Saarian, you mean," corrected Kit. "What you overlooked was that, even though they have a fear of violence that you might term psychopathic, the Saarians are not a stupid race. We put them in a spot where they had to take action, so they did. Knowing the pugnacious nature of both our cultures, what easier way to get us off their necks than to have a supposed Polarian cruiser destroy an Earth ship during negotiations? They predicted the consequence perfectly. Earth would accuse, Polarius would deny, both sides would lose their tempers, and BANG!" He turned to the Saarian emissary.

"If you were up in a tree with two jungle beasts prowling around underneath, would you be able to use a blaster in your own defense?"

The Saarian shuddered at the thought. "Of course not!"

"But if they started fighting among themselves?"

"If violent creatures choose to destroy themselves, it is no concern of mine," said the little man.

Kincaide was still not wholly convinced. "But where could they find a crew for a ship of war?"

"It's simple," said Kit. "Check over the pattern of violence displayed by the crew after they captured me. They destroyed my ship, but before they did so they were careful to get me off safely. Once I was prisoner, there was a constant threat of violence, but note that it was never actually carried out. It's true that no sane Saarian would act as they did—but why assume they were sane? When the Saarians had to find men capable of the show of violence, they went to the only place where such men could be found, their insane asylums. Obviously, in a non-violent culture, the violent men would be considered mad. So the Saarians solved their problem by staffing the cruiser with men they considered to be homicidal maniacs. Unfortunately for them, when it came to an actual show of violence, when I socked one of them on the nose, the madmen weren't any better able to take it than the sane."

"The sane?" asked Kincaide.

"There were some—the priesthood. They were really the crew's keepers. There had to be somebody along to keep that bunch in line. Being by profession in constant contact with the violent,

they had stronger stomachs than the rest."

He paused and motioned to an alert-looking, white-headed man who had just entered the tent. "Here's the chief psychtech now. I think he'll be able to back up what I just told you."

The white-haired man advanced, saluted, and began his report.

"A thorough examination of the two Saarians brought in by Pilot Officer Carpenter has just been completed. In both cases we found conflicting delusional syndromes. Each of them is a psychotic whose paranoia expresses itself periodically in grandiose delusions. What makes these cases interesting, however, is that a second delusional pattern has artificially been imposed on them so that they are usually under the impression that they are members of the Polarian space forces. This, however, occasionally breaks down and the original syndrome becomes temporarily dominant."

"In other words," said Kincaide helpfully, "they're nuts!"

The psychtech frowned and said severely, "Paranoid syndromes are a phenomenon that is by no means foreign to normal human psychology. The degree of divergency can only be determined by relating it to the norm. Since the norm itself is relative . . ."

"All right," said Kincaide hastily, "they're not nuts."

The psychtech frowned at the interruption and continued. "On Saar these men would be considered detention cases because the Saarian social pattern has moved so far along the road to non-violence that the symbol—the angry word or the threatening gesture—is viewed with the same alarm that more aggressive cultures reserve for the actual deed itself. Placed in a Polarian or a Terrestrial context, however, these men would be viewed as harmless eccentrics. No matter how they rant and posture, they're constitutionally incapable of actual violence."

"Well, I guess that ties it up," said Tarz. He turned to Kit. "You of course have the gratitude of the Polarian people for preventing an unnecessary war, but the next time you feel impelled to pull a stunt like this, leave your blaster at home. The way your hand was shaking, I was afraid you'd let the thing off by accident."

Kit pulled his weapon out of its holster and laughed. "This? It isn't loaded. You see, sir, regulations provide that we have to wear these, but I've always been afraid that it might go off by accident. So I never loaded it.

See!" He waved the blaster in Tarz' general direction and pressed the firing stud. A flash of actinic light fanned a scant six inches above the Polarian commander's head. The back side of the tent and the top half of the communications mast that stood behind it vanished forever. A moment later howls of anguish rose from the encampment as the gaseous cloud of metal from the mast began to condense and spatter the area with tiny drops of molten metal.

Space Marshall Kincaide's voice was strangely soft when he finally spoke. "In your short but checkered military career, didn't anybody ever see fit to inform you that a Mark IV blaster has a built-in charge?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Kit apologetically, "but the day they gave the lecture on side-arms I was on guard duty and . . ."

He shrugged.

"Get that character out of here," yelled Tarz, "or we're going to have a brand new war on our hands!"

"One second," said Kincaide, struck by a sudden thought, "I know you've had a hard day, Carpenter, but if it wouldn't be too much to ask . . . that pouch you were sent out from Earth with . . . it had my laundry in it."

"Regret to report, sir," said Kit, "that I burned it up. You see . . ."

Kincaide looked at Tarz and Tarz looked at Kincaide. Moved by a single thought, they both started to rise from the table. Kit started to back nervously toward the door. Then with an effort they both caught themselves and sat down again.

Negotiations returned to normal as Tarz stabbed his finger down at the point on the map that marked the largest of the stellite deposits. "Now my government insists . . ."

There was an interruption from the Saarian end of the table. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said the little emissary, "but I am afraid that on the behalf of my government I shall have to ask you to give up this division of what isn't yours and remove yourselves and your forces to your home systems."

Tarz and Kincaide stared at him in amazement. Then the Polarian gave a short barking laugh. "Look at who's giving orders. The rabbit is showing his teeth."

For once the Saarian didn't subside in frightened confusion. Instead he rose to his feet and held his hands up for silence. He trembled visibly, but even so there was a certain dignity about him as if he were drawing on

sources of hidden internal strength.

"You have called us rabbits," he said quietly. "This is not correct. Though you cannot understand it, we have come of age. In this coming we have put the brawling manners of our childhood so far behind us that only our unfortunates, our psychotics, are still capable of even the threat of violence.

"But this you should remember: there are cultures in this galaxy of a wildness that makes yours seem those of meek and timid children. Space wolves straining at the leash, begging for an excuse to spring at your throats."

He turned to Tarz. "You who boast of martial prowess, would you care to match ships with the Rigelians?"

A momentary expression of fear flickered across the Prince's face.

"We have other madmen and other ships," said the Saarian. "An exact replica of your own flagship is hanging off Orionis now, manned by green-bearded men. If it came out of hyperspace in the middle of a crowded space lane and blasted a merchant ship, would not the Rigelian war lords be grateful?"

Tarz turned deathly pale and sat down abruptly.

Kincaide sickened inside as he had a momentary vision of a blackened, burning Earth engloped by the blood-red ships of Achernar.

The little man left his place at the end of the table and walked through the silence to the door of the tent.

"And now if you'll excuse me," he said politely, "I am late for my lute lesson. On behalf of the people of Saar, may I wish you both a pleasant and speedy voyage home."

Late that evening a pilot officer of the Planetary Ferry Command walked happily up the embarkation ramp of Space Marshall Kincaide's flagship, his discharge papers tucked safely away in an inner pocket. The diamond studded Terrestrial Cross and the great gleaming Polarian emerald of the Order of Merit, Third Grade, that had just been pinned to his chest, sparkled under the floodlights. There was a beatific smile on his face and a song in his heart as his fingers stroked these tributes from two great peace loving systems. Meanwhile a busy little calculating machine inside his head was rapidly converting them into crisp piles of one hundred credit notes. Civilian-to-be Kittridge Carpenter, owner and chief pilot of Ajax Carriers, was going home.

WHAT GOES UP

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY BEECHAM

What goes up must come down, as they say about even the stock market. It was true enough, until Edgarson found a world where the law of averages was repealed. They ran strictly to flat top square waves: very square.

"All right, space rat, out you go," the junior officer said with a wide, boyish grin.

"Couldn't we talk this over?" Edgarson asked, edging down the gangplank with a certain dignity. "I mean, to leave me in this backwoods— " He gestured at the dusty, deserted landing field, the raw brick buildings, the tar road; all the signs of a low-order atomic civilization.

"I assure you," Edgarson went on, "I would be glad to work my passage if you'd just take me to some civilized —"

The port closed with a clang. Edgarson sighed and walked away from the ship. My God, he thought. I don't even know the name of the planet where they've gone and dumped me!

He pushed back his shoulders as he reached the tar road. Behind him the ship lifted, silently and efficiently, and was gone. Once the ship was out of sight, Edgarson allowed his back to slump.

Those damned starships . . .

But he couldn't blame them. A stowaway has no rights. He had known that. But what else could he have done?

After his businesses had gone bankrupt on Moira II, Edgarson had to get out, but fast. The fastest way without capital was to hide aboard a long-haul transport.

The ship had taken off just in time. The authorities of the Belt Stars, of which Moira II was the proudest jewel, were quite strict

CYCLE B

with what they termed "irresponsible" bankruptcies.

Unfortunately, the ship's captain was equally strict with unpaid-for weight. They had dropped Edgarson's scrawny 132 pounds on the first oxygen planet on their course.

What was he going to do now?

Edgarson glanced back at the signs in front of the little spaceport. Luckily they were in Fammish, one of the great interstellar tongues. The planet was called Porif. He had never heard of it.

One of the signs pointed to the city of Mif. Edgarson followed it, hands in his pockets, scuffing his feet along the rough tar.

This, he told himself was the end. The absolute end. He'd never get off this place. Four times he had made fortunes, and four times lost them in the maddening uncertainties of beltstar finances.

I'm through, he thought. Might as well hang myself.

A passing vehicle almost made hanging unnecessary. An antique gas job, it was rolling along at a good seventy miles an hour. Edgarson heard it, turned, and there it was, swaying over the entire road. His eyes bulged. It was coming straight for him.

At the last moment he unparalyzed his muscles enough to leap into the ditch beside him.

The car ground to a halt a hundred feet up the road.

"You maniac!" Edgarson screamed in passable Fammish. Suicide was all very well. But when one is almost killed—

"What are you doing now?" he shouted at the man, who was backing his car. "Coming back for another try?"

"Terribly sorry," the man said, smiling pleasantly. He was large, red-faced and red-headed. "Did not mean to frighten you."

"Frighten me!" Edgarson said. "The hell with that. You almost killed me."

"Oh, no," the man said, eyeing him closely. "You're not old enough."

"Sure I'm old enough," Edgarson said. "Anyone is old enough to die."

"You must be an outworlder," the redheaded man said. "I should have noticed your accent. Well, friend, you can't die here. Not yet."

"I can die any place or time I want," Edgarson said, feeling silly.

The redheaded man thought that over for a moment, rubbing the side of his nose with a freckled forefinger. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Thirty-six."

"I thought you were about my age. Here on Porif you can't die

before you're fifty-four. At least, not during this cycle."

Edgarson didn't have any immediate answer for that. He just gaped.

"My name's Fals," the man told him. "Could I offer you a ride into town?" Edgarson climbed into the car. In a few moments Fals had it careening crazily over the road.

"You'll kill us both," Edgarson gasped as the landscape whizzed by.

"Well, I *am* a touch euphoric," Fals said. "But the statistics are against it. I won't kill either of us. And the car's insured."

Edgarson rode the rest of the way in stoical silence. He didn't know what sort of place Porif was, and until he found out, he determined to keep quiet. He didn't want to break any taboos. He knew that in the bewildering array of planets in the civilized galaxy, there were some pretty odd spots. Places where reason and common sense went to hell on a trolley. Places where the law of gravity was repealed for six months out of the year, and the verities of Earth science were looked upon as polite fiction.

Natural law, as defined by Earth and Belt scientists, didn't mean much to old mother nature. Perhaps she just hadn't wanted to construct a logical, consistent type of universe.

Edgarson was prepared to accept, tentatively, that he couldn't die before the age of fifty-four. On Porif.

"Here we are," Fals said cheerfully, pulling up in front of a small brick house in what must have been a suburb of the city. "Is there anything I can do for you? Any favor, anything?"

He *must* be euphoric, Edgarson thought. But he wasn't going to let the opportunity slip past him.

"I'm temporarily embarrassed for funds," he began smoothly. "If you could—"

"Say no more," Fals said. "Be my guest. Stay at my house. I couldn't refuse you anything, right now."

"You couldn't?" Edgarson asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Practically nothing. I'm at the extreme peak of an altruist upswing. One of my personality characteristics. It'll pass in a day or two, of course. I'll probably regret all this exceedingly. But come in."

Just outside the doorway he stopped. "Don't mind my sister," he said in a confiding whisper. "Hetta's not feeling so good. You know how ectomorphs can be? Well, she's just coming out of the bottom of a depressive trough. Be nice to her." He

laughed uproariously and kicked open the door.

Inside, it was what he had expected of a lower atomic age dwelling. Lumpy couches, blobby pictures on the wall, ridiculous curtains and overstuffed chairs.

Edgarson looked around warily, trying to figure out his next move. Either his patron was slightly off his track, or there was something unique about this planet. *Depressive trough.* Even citizens of the more sophisticated regions didn't have that sort of knowledge at their fingertips.

"Are you a psychologist?" he asked Fals, sitting down on a chair.

"No," Fals said. "I'm a fireman, usually."

"Usually?"

"Yes. I'm on a vacation now. All of us are."

"Then who fights the fires?"

"What fires?" Fals asked, surprised.

Edgarson was about to start over when the depressive sister came in.

"Oh, I'm tired," she said, ignoring Edgarson and collapsing on the couch. "Tired and unhappy."

Edgarson stared at her for a moment, before remembering his manners and standing up. The girl was as redheaded as her brother, but slim where he was corpulent. Ectomorph, had he said? Well, Hetta was slender, but she was also filled where a female ectomorph should be filled.

Edgarson felt his spirits brighten. Suicide could wait. This might prove interesting. There might even be some exploitable commercial angle.

For a while conversation was desultory. Fals turned on a little screen which seemed to be a primitive brother of solidovision. He was soon engrossed in what purported to be a comedy program.

The redheaded girl, Hetta, didn't stir. Once she murmured something about the cruelty of the world, but it was too vague for Edgarson to answer.

Finally, she lifted herself off the couch and essayed a tentative smile.

"You see?" Fals whispered. "She's out of the trough."

Edgarson shook his head. A fireman who didn't fight fires, but who had a pretty accurate psychological knowledge. Well, he'd have to find out.

"I think I'll make supper," Hetta said, and jumped off the couch.

The meal was very pleasant. Hetta was fascinated by the great outside world she had never seen. She listened breathlessly

to Edgarson's tales of interstellar commerce, and of the ridiculous drop in the stock market on Moira II that had wrecked him.

She put the soup on the table and asked, "How could that happen?" Edgarson smiled at her charming naivete. "Weren't you in a cycle?" she wanted to know. "Didn't you *know* the market was going to drop?"

Edgarson did his best to explain how business worked. How you could occasionally detect trends, calculate rises, prepare for drops. But not always. And that, even at best, market calculation was guesswork.

"But that's ridiculous," Hetta said, frowning prettily. "How can you live in such an uncertain world? I'm glad it's not that way here."

"You must excuse my sister," Fals said, smiling. "She doesn't know anything of the outside world—"

Edgarson ignored him. "How does it work here?" he asked the girl.

"Why, it's down in the books," she said, as one would instruct a child. "The statistics books. If a business is going to be good, the statistics books tell you."

"Aren't the books ever wrong?" Edgarson asked, gently.

She shook her head. "Not during the cycle."

Just then a bell clamored. Fals got up and answered the telephone.

"Yes. yes, yes. Hm. All right, I'll check it." He put down the receiver. "Fire in the 31st Warehouse district." He thought for a moment. "I don't believe it's going to spread."

"You might as well be sure," Hetta said. "I'll bring in the book."

"Hang on," Fals said into the telephone. Hetta struggled back with a fat volume. Edgarson walked over and watched.

The book was entitled *Fire Statistics, City of Mif, Cycle B.*

"Here it is," Fals said, turning a page. "Margat Building, 31st Warehouse district. Just as I thought."

Looking over his shoulder, Edgarson read: "Margat Building, probability 78.4% against a major fire before 18 Arget."

"Hello," Fals said into the telephone. "You're not due for a fire before 18 Arget, and here it isn't even Hovl yet. Don't worry about it. I'll burn itself out pretty soon."

The man on the other end seemed to be giving him an argument. Fals said into the phone, sharply, "Don't tell *me*, pal. I'm a fireman. It's in the book. Probability 78.4 against. Call me if it spreads." He hung up.

"That's how it goes," he said to Edgarson. "These warehouse owners would root a man out of bed for every little flash fire. I don't know why they don't read the statistics on their own buildings."

"I don't get it," Edgarson said. "Was there a fire in that warehouse?"

"That's what *he* said," Fals said, finishing his soup. Hetta cleared the plates and brought in the meat course. "Probably a wastebasket or something. They always look bigger than they are."

"But if he reported a fire—" Edgarson began.

"It can't be a big fire," Hetta told him. "Otherwise it would be down in the statistics."

"Statistics can be wrong," Edgarson said, remembering several beatings he had taken on sure things.

"Not these," Fals said.

The telephone rang again. "Hello?" Fals said. "I thought so. Of course it burned itself out. No, you didn't disturb me. Don't worry about it. But please, buy a fire statistics book. That way, you won't have to be calling the fire station all the time. I assure you, when a real fire is due, we'll be on the spot—*before* it happens. Good night."

"Could I see this fire book?" Edgarson asked. Fals handed him the big volume, and Edgarson leafed through it, reading entries at random.

"Joenson farm," one entry read. "Probability 56% no major fire before 7 Hovl."

"Mif State Park," read another. "Prob. 64% no major fire before 1 Egl. Prob. 89% fire by 19 Egl, destroying fifty-four acres NE corner."

The rest of the entries followed the same pattern.

"I don't understand this," Edgarson said, closing the book. "I know you can determine a probability, even about fires. That's how insurance works. But how can you know there won't be a fire before the date the book gives? I mean, even if the probability is seventy percent—and I don't see how that's arrived at—there's still a thirty percent chance that there'll be a fire sooner."

"Not here," Fals said, with a touch of local pride. "Not on Porif. Any probability of fifty-one percent or better is as good as one hundred percent during the cycle. We don't believe in exceptions here. What's probable is certain."

"Does that work with everything?" Edgarson asked.

"Of course," Fals told him. "That's why I knew I wouldn't kill you with the car. The statistics for this cycle show that no

one under fifty-four is going to be killed, except under certain specified circumstances which you didn't come under."

"How long is the cycle?" Edgarson asked.

"Ten years. Then a new one starts. Come in the library. I'll show you some of the other books."

Lining one whole wall was a set of books called *Business Statistics, Cycle B.* Leafing through them, Edgarson found that they contained predictions for every business on the planet through the present cycle. They showed the probable profit and loss figures weekly. The businesses that would bankrupt were down, as well as the ones that would boom.

Skimming, Edgarson read: "Jeenings Carbon, common stock. Selling, 145, 1 Marstt. In two weeks, prob. 56% to 189. Constant to Egl, 89% prob., then rise to 720. A period of leveling at 700, then a short steep incline to 842—" That was a summary, of course. A week by week breakdown followed.

"Is this true?" Edgarson asked.

Hetta glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, of course. The stock is at 189 right now. And the rest will follow."

"My Lord," Edgarson said, and closed the book. If the entry were true, a man could make a fortune by investing now. Invest and sell when it reached 842. Make a profit of—

"Wait a minute," he said. "This can't be true. Everyone on the planet would buy this stuff. That would change the prediction."

"No," Fals said, grinning. "The probable purchases of stocks are estimated pretty closely. No one's going to overload on one stock. We scatter our money around, buy good and bad. We Porifans don't care so much for quick profits."

Edgarson thought it over. He'd have to find out if this prediction business worked every time. If it did, he had stumbled on a gold mine.

A *predictable* stock market, he told himself. Predictable businesses, fire losses. They probably predicted earthquakes and floods, too. A smart man could make a fortune in a year. Or less.

Of course, he'd need some capital to invest at the start. He'd have to find some way of getting that.

Edgarson discovered, suddenly that Hetta was glancing at him. That was significant. But she was also pretending that she wasn't looking at him. That was even more significant.

Edgarson decided that it might

not be too difficult to raise the initial capital.

The next morning, Edgarson went to Fals' library. The Porifan didn't own all the statistics books, but he did have everything that pertained to the city of Mif, and its immediate area.

Ignoring breakfast, Edgarson began to read, skipping back and forth between the 190 volumes of *Business Statistics, Cycle B.* It was quite a book.

It told the future history of every business on the planet, and Edgarson was unable to doubt its validity. The conservative, quiet air of the books was almost proof in itself.

"Jacnx Mauf. Co. Common 23.
13 Luggat, rise to 26, prob. 76%
19 Luggat, rise to 28, prob. 93%
1 Mener, drop to 18, prob. 98%."

How could he doubt it?

Edgarson made the attempt, in the spirit of caution. He ate breakfast at lunchtime and went to the Mif central library. According to the evidence in old newspapers and outdated statistics books, all previous predictions had been one hundred percent correct. One hundred percent!

Edgarson checked further. He found that a cycle lasted for ten revolutions of the planet around its primary- -ten years. That there was a gap between cycles, evidently for the purpose of collecting and publishing the statistics for the next cycle. The cycles were always labeled A and B, one following another.

Checking one cycle against another, Edgarson found that there wasn't much difference. Some new businesses, the closing of some old ones; a few points change in probability-ratings. But no real turnover.

Edgarson wasn't interested in theories; he wanted profits. Still, he felt obliged to find out some of the reasons why. Accordingly, he dug into a stack of reference books.

Late that night, he walked back to Fals' house. He had skimmed the history and psychology of Porif, and he was able to extrapolate a few answers from it.

According to their own psychology books, the people of Porif were simpler, less unpredictable than the complex peoples of Earth and the Belt Stars. It was possible to get a coherent, predictable picture of a Porifan's personality; a feat impossible with an Earthman.

The hard thing, Edgarson knew, was individual psychology. Once you have that mastered, the psychology of aggregates is far simpler.

Edgarson found that the Porifans were conformists. Con-

sciously and unconsciously they believed their own statistics, and wanted to preserve them. Individuals went out of their way to fit into their predicted niche. On perverse Moira II that would never work.

The favorite hobby of most planets is war. A very few are more interested in art, or religion. On Porif the passion was, and had always been, statistics and probabilities.

And nature seemed to help them. The perverse old lady had repealed the usual law of averages on Porif. Instead of a constant leveling process, high predictions stayed constant. So, if a fire started ahead of time, there was never a draft to fan it into a conflagration. If a man was in an auto accident before his predicted moment, he somehow was thrown clear.

Nature conspired to make Porif an understandable, predictable place to live.

A perfect place for an Earthman to make a quick fortune.

Edgarson slept on it. The next morning he walked down to Fals' library to consider his problem again. Seating himself in Fals' overstuffed chair, he popped a native variety of plum in his mouth and thought.

The first step in making a fortune was to raise capital, and the first step in raising capital was to marry Hetta. Securing some of her funds through marriage, he could speculate—if a sure thing can be called speculation. He had about six months until the end of cycle B. He could be rich by that time.

And marrying Hetta wouldn't be too unpleasant a task, either. Edgarson liked ectomorphic redheads, properly filled.

No time like the present, he told himself. Hetta had gone to town, shopping, and Fals was off waiting for a fire to start on an outlying farm.

Edgarson pulled down the index to the *Human Statistics* book, Cycle B. (170 volumes, cross indexed). Hetta, he found, was on page 1189 of volume 23. Her classification was *unstable ectomorph, female, auburn, 32-saa3b.*

According to the book, a person of Hetta's makeup had a primary five day elation-depression cycle; normal for auburn ectomorphs. The trough usually occurred at sunset of the third day. During that time, auburn ectomorphs desired comfort, poetry and understanding, soft music and beautiful sunsets.

Edgarson grinned, jotted the information on a pad and read on.

The elation-high occurred on the fifth day, and lasted for al-

most two hours. There was a strong tendency toward amorousness at such times (89% probability), and a desire for adventure, mystery, the unknown.

Edgarson grinned even wider, and read on.

Superimposed on all this was a longer, gentler cycle, characterized as a secondary tenderness swing, over a period of thirty-five days.

And a great deal more pertinent data.

Edgarson drew up a graph of Hetta's cycles for the next month, with appropriate comments and advice to himself, and read the last paragraph.

Hetta's instability was one common to ectomorphic redheads. A pathological tendency, very repressed, probability 7%.

Which, he knew, was Porif double-talk for never.

Armed with this data, Edgarson began his wooing.

"Let me tell you about the great planets," he said to her at the height of her elation period. "Let me tell you about space."

"Oh, please do," Hetta said. "I so wish I could travel!"

"And why not?" Edgarson said, sliding his arm gently across the top of the couch. "Why not speed between the stars in a two-bunk scouter? Know the adventure of strange ports! The thrill of distant places!"

"How wonderful," Hetta said, and didn't flinch when the arm gently touched her shoulder.

When he wasn't wooing Hetta, Edgarson was busy with Business Statistics. He made up a list of ten businesses that were going to boom, figured out how long he would hold stock, what he would invest the profits in, how much he could buy on margin.

His profits at the end of a month, he estimated, would be in the hundred thousands.

"You are so delicate," he said to her, at the extreme tip of her tenderness swing. "So fair, so gentle."

"Am I?" Hetta asked.

"Yes," Edgarson said, with a sigh. "I wish—"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." He sighed again, and proceeded to give her a fictitious account of his childhood. It served its purpose. All Hetta's latent tenderness came to the fore.

"You poor boy," she said.

The omnipresent arm was around her.

"I care for you, you know," Edgarson said huskily, feeling ridiculous. He was used to the breezy give-and-take approach of Earth and Moira II. On civilized planets a definite understanding was reached within five minutes or so. But that wouldn't work on

Porif, or on a girl with Hetta's character-coefficients.

Edgarson proceeded as a tender-hearted lover, wondering when Porif would emerge from its purple period.

While he wooed her, Edgarson extrapolated an easy ten billion dollar profit from the *Business Statistics*. He had it all figured out now; how he would make his initial profits, how much he would plough back, how much he would extend himself on margin, how much save.

And the other things. Land he was going to buy, farms and waterways. Insurance companies, banks, federal investments. The ten year cycle had only a few months to go. He wanted a measure of security during the gap between cycles.

The climax of his love-making came at the trough of Hetta's depression. He bought her candy; he showered her with tenderness, love and understanding. A phonograph was playing Hetta's favorite song at the moment Edgarson proposed. And to top it all, before their eyes was a magnificent, multicolored sunset; a sunset lovers dream of.

It wasn't chance, of course. Edgarson had planned it carefully. The sunset had been listed in *Weather Statistics, Cycle B, combined with Holinim's Greater Book of Sunsets.*

The proposal was a predictable success, odds 89.7% for. They were married three days later.

Armed with more of his wife's money than even he had expected, Edgarson started to invest. He had five months to go, and he was going to make the most of it.

The statistics books were one hundred percent accurate. Edgarson's profits came through exactly as he had planned. Down to the last decimal point, the books were right.

He tried to put his brother-in-law on to a few good things, but Fals was in a sullen period. He held on to a small block of mediocre stocks, resolutely, and refused to speculate.

"What's the matter with you?" Edgarson asked him, one day when his profit had hit eight hundred thousand. "Don't you believe in your own statistics?"

"Of course I do," Fals said, glowering at him. "But this isn't the way we do business here."

Edgarson stared at him, baffled. He was unable to understand a man who didn't take money when it was practically handed to him. It was the Porifans' most inhuman characteristic.

"Aren't you going to invest in anything?" Edgarson asked.

"Of course I am," Fals said.

"I'm buying a block of Heemstl limited."

Edgarson went over to *Business Statistics*—now his bible—and looked up the concern. The book gave it a 75 percent probability of a sizeable loss during the cycle.

"What the hell are you buying *that* for?" Edgarson asked.

"Well," Fals said, "They need some more operating capital. Young concern, you know. I figure—"

"Please stop, you weary me," Edgarson said. Fals looked even more sullen and left.

What could you do, Edgarson asked himself. Of course you had to have people investing in poor stocks. Not *everyone* can get rich. And it was very noble of the Porifans, to support their failing businesses. But what could you do with people like that?

Take their money, he told himself.

The next months were feverish ones for Edgarson. It was necessary to buy at exactly the right time, sell at the right time. The Porifan stock market was like an orchestra. Delicacy in timing had to be observed, to get everything possible out of it.

Edgarson's businesses spread.

He didn't have much time for Hetta during these months. Building a great fortune was absorbing, night-and-day work. But he figured he would make it all up to her later.

Besides, she thought he was wonderful.

With the cycle nearing its end, Edgarson planned out his procedure for the hiatus. During the year gap, new predictions would be assembled and published. But Edgarson wasn't going to be caught napping.

Most of his businesses he felt, were bound to bridge the gap between cycle B and A. They were sound concerns with high probability ratings. But he wanted to be sure, so he sold his fluctuating wildcat stocks and put money in farms, city real estate, hotels, parks, government bonds, anything that looked sound.

He put excess profits in the banks. It was possible, he supposed, for a ninety-five-percent-good bank to go busted. But not five of them! Not ten of them!

"I've got a good tip for you," his brother-in-law said, two days before the end of the cycle. "Buy some Verstt. Buy it big."

Upon looking it up, Edgarson discovered that Verstt was on the verge of receivership. He looked at Fals coldly. The Porifan probably resented his presence here. Didn't approve of the way he was cleaning up the cash, and wanted to slow him down

"I'll think it over," Edgarson said, ushering Fals to the door.

How could you argue with an idiot?

The day came, ending Cycle B. Edgarson spent the morning at his telephones, waiting for news.

The phone rang.

"Yes?" Edgarson asked.

"Sir, Markinson company stock dropping."

Edgarson smiled, and put down the telephone. Markinson had been a good investment. He'd ride any loss down. After he got through this depression—if that was what it was—he'd have ten more years to recoup in. And then he'd get out!

Take a lot, leave a little, that was his motto.

The telephones started ringing constantly. More of his businesses were failing, dropping, going bankrupt. The bottom had dropped out of manufacturing. Iron ore was slag on the market. Mines were worthless.

Still, Edgarson wasn't alarmed. There was still real estate, farms, insurance, waterways, federal projects—

A telephone call informed him that his largest farm had burned to the ground, crops and all.

"Good," Edgarson said. "Collect the insurance."

Another call informed him that his chief insurance company had gone bankrupt, as had its underwriters.

Edgarson started to sweat. He was having a few bad breaks, but—

It did go on. Telephones rang night and day. The banks started to fail! One after another, Edgarson's gilt-edged concerns dwindled and dropped. And the damndest things happened to Edgarson's other concerns.

Farms were burnt to the ground, roads were flooded, canals were exploded. People were hurt on his line, and sued. Tornadoes hit, earthquakes followed. Dams built to last a century burst. Buildings collapsed.

Coincidence, Edgarson told him, holding on to his morale with a death-like grip.

Then the federal government announced that it would go into temporary receivership, if anyone would take it.

That killed a few more of Edgarson's billions.

It made depressions in the belt group seem like mild prosperity.

It took just under a month to strip Edgarson of most of his holdings. Too numb to think, he stumbled into Fals' library. His wife was there, curled up in a corner. Evidently she was depressive again. Fals was standing, arms folded across his chest, staring at him self-righteously.

"What happened?" Edgarson croaked.

"During the hiatus," Fals told him, "All odds are reversed."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you know that?" Fals said. "I thought you were a big finance man."

"Give," Edgarson said.

"How do you think the statisticians get their figures?" Fals told him. "If the major predictions came true all the time, they'd be one hundred percent. During the gap, everything that was below fifty percent probability—and therefore never came about—obtains."

"Gah," said Edgarson.

"Look, suppose you wanted certain odds to average out, as they must. Something is ninety percent certain. It works out one hundred percent of the time for ten years. In order for the prediction of ninety percent to be right, it would have to be ten percent wrong for ten years, or 100 percent wrong for one year.

"Understand? If a business is ninety percent sure of success for the ten year cycle, it has to be 100 percent sure of failure for that year. It *must* fail."

"Say it again," Edgarson mumbled.

"I think you understand it now," Fals said. "That's why all of us buy low-probability stocks during the cycle. They work out fine during the gap."

"Oh, Lord," Edgarson said, and sat down.

"You didn't think your stocks would go up forever, did you?" Fals asked.

Edgarson had thought just that. Or rather, he had taken it for granted. Logically, he knew Fals was right. On other planets, odds are constantly averaging. Not on Porif. Here, everything went one way or the other. Ten years, during which time all the highs obtained. Then a year, during which the former lows obtained.

Of course, it averaged quite nicely. But what a way to do it!

He was dimly aware that Fals had left the room.

Somewhere a telephone was ringing.

"Yeh?" Edgarson said, taking it on the library extension. He listened for a while, then hung up.

He had just been informed that he was several billion dollars in debt, largely due to marginal buying.

On Porif they had prisons for irresponsible bankruptcies.

"Well," Edgarson said, "I guess I'll just have to—"

"Stand still, damn you," Hetta said, getting to her feet. She was holding a pistol in both hands.

It was an old, chemically operated revolver, of a sort that civilized nations hadn't used in centuries. But it was as capable of killing as a more modern arm.

"Oh, how I hate you," Hetta said, in her flamboyant style. "I hate everyone, but you the worst. Stand still!"

Edgarson was calculating the odds against his jumping out the library window safely. Unfortunately he didn't have a book handy to give him the figures.

"I'm going to shoot you in the stomach," Hetta said, with a smile that made his flesh crawl. "I want to see you die slowly."

That did it. Hetta's seven percent instability was coming out, exactly as the minor odds against tornadoes, floods and earthquakes had come out. She was a murderess!

No wonder, Edgarson thought, she had been so easy to marry.

"Stop swaying," Hetta said, taking careful aim.

Edgarson crashed through the window, the explosion of the gun deafening him. He didn't stop to see whether he was dead or not, but ran full tilt for the spaceport.

He hoped the odds were in his favor.

"O.K., space rat," the grinning young officer said. "Out you go." He pushed Edgarson down the gangplank.

"Where am I?" Edgarson asked. He had climbed aboard the ship before an irate mob seized him. The captain had taken him one stop, but no further.

"What's it matter?" the officer asked, prodding him.

"If you would consider taking me to a civilized port—" Edgarson began.

The port slammed behind him.

Well, this is the end, he told himself. This was the end of the road, the absolute blank wall. Here he was, on another backwoods planet. He'd never get off this one. Might as well commit suicide.

"Hello," someone said. Edgarson looked up. In front of him was a green skinned native. On each of his three arms the native wore a bracelet of what looked like platinum. In each bracelet was what looked like a gigantic diamond.

The native was wheeling a wheelbarrow filled with dirt. The wheelbarrow seemed to be made of solid gold.

"How do you do, friend?" Edgarson said, walking up to the native and smiling.

AMONG THE FEN:

THIS IS THE PSFS

BY ROBERT A. MADLE

Herewith, SCENCE FICTION ADVENTURES begins its series of articles on the long-neglected fan clubs. Since 1953 is the year when the World Science Fiction Convention meets in Philadelphia, we natura!ly begin with the group which will sponsor it there.

By this time the news that the *Philadelphia Science Fiction Society* will be the host organization for the 1953 World Science Fiction Convention has been well disseminated. This organization, more familiarly known as the PSFS, won the nomination for the 1953 gala affair over a very strong delegation of San Francisco fans who were expected to be awarded the affair with little or no opposition. Many of the more than one thousand attendees were amazed when the PSFS was victorious on the third ballot. How could any organization defy and defeat such a super-active group as *The Little Men* of San Francisco? How could this group solicit the support of the majority when it had indulged in absolutely no pre-convention electioneering or campaigning? This answer is quite simple: the PSFS, although not active in fan affairs in recent years, is one of the oldest, largest, and most mature science fiction groups extant. It has been in existence almost as long as science fiction fandom itself and, from all indications, will live forever. And therein lies a tale.

It was in the April, 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories* that Hugo

Gernsback first announced the formation of the *Science Fiction League*. This organization probably did more toward the formation of a unified science fiction fandom than any other single factor in fan history. Immediately following the announcement, science fiction fans joined by the hundreds. Local chapters of the SFL were formed all over the world. One of these was Chapter Number Eleven, the *Philadelphia Science Fiction League*. Milton A. Rothman, Philadelphia's only active fan and demon letterwriter at the time, gathered together four SFL members, submitted their names to Charles D. Hornig, then Managing Editor of *Wonder Stories* and Secretary of the SFL, and received his charter in December, 1934. The initial meeting of the PSFL was held in January, 1935, with Rothman, Raymond Peel Mariella, Paul Hunter, and Charles Bert attending. Several meetings were held, but the club soon faded into inactivity because of non-attendance and lack of interest. Rothman, convinced that there just weren't any science fiction fans in Philadelphia, ceased his intensive campaign to organize a local group.

However, operating independently of Rothman, was another small group of young fans—extremely young, as a matter of fact. They were John V. Baltadonis, Jack Agnew, Harvey Greenblatt, and Robert A. Madle. In early 1935 they formed a small stf discussion group and termed themselves *The Boys' Science Fiction Club*. The average age of this group was 13-14 years, and it is interesting to note that three of the aforementioned fans still retain their keen interest in science fiction—the fourth, Harvey Greenblatt, was killed in action during World War II.

Madle, noticing Rothman's formation of the *Philadelphia Science Fiction League*, wrote requesting information and indicating the fact that he was aware of several others who were interested in joining. For some obscure reason Rothman never received this letter and, believing they had created too juvenile an impression, did not repeat their request for membership in the PSFL. What they didn't realize at the time was the fact that Director Rothman was just slightly more mellow in years than they. However, several months later Baltadonis and Madle appeared in *Amazing Stories'* readers' column and Rothman quickly communicated with them, and his dream of a Philadelphia Chapter of the SFL

finally came into existence.

The first "reorganization" meeting of the PSFL was held in October, 1935, with Rothman, Mariella, Baltadonis, Madle, and Oswald Train in attendance. Train, a collector for many years, had just relocated in Philadelphia, and was a welcome addition to the club. He had written an entire science fiction test for the League department of *Wonder Stories* and had appeared in print in *The Time Traveler*, the first fan magazine, and the younger members considered him a real "old timer." Jack Agnew and Harvey Greenblatt became members at the following meeting. Meetings were held weekly and these early gatherings were informal affairs with the entire several hours being consumed with science fiction discussions.

Within a few months it became obvious that the PSFL was rapidly assuming the proportions of a major stf club. The organization received its first important recognition when Rothman was informed by Charles D. Hornig, the amazing teen-age editor of *Wonder Stories*, that he intended to pay a visit to Philadelphia and the PSFL. The members, thrilled and elated, gathered at Rothman's home one Saturday afternoon in December, 1935, and personally shook the hand of the Executive Secretary of the SFL. Accompanying Hornig was Julius Schwartz, then editor of fandom's greatest publication, *Fantasy Magazine*.

In early 1936 the name of the club was changed from the PSFL to the PSFS. It was decided that the term "League" was inadequate and, perhaps, misrepresented the organization's aims and ideals. However, the PSFS still retained its status as Chapter Eleven of the *Science Fiction League*.

The most important occurrence in the then brief history of the PSFS took place in October of 1936. The members were agreeably surprised to receive letters from the officers of the *International Scientific Association*, the leading fan group of the time, advising that they were to visit the PSFS. The great day arrived and quite a few PSFS members were at the train station to welcome the New York delegation which included such prominent names as Donald A. Wollheim, William S. Sykora, Frederik Pohl, David A. Kyle, John B. Michel, and Herbert Goudket. After the visitors were shown about town, a gathering was held at Rothman's home where it was officially decided that this meeting would be recorded in history as the first "fan convention." It was also decided that this would

be only the beginning, and initial plans were formulated for the *First World Science Fiction Convention,* to be held in conjunction with the World's Fair in New York City in 1939.

In October, 1936, also appeared the first issue of the *Fantasy Fiction Telegram*, which was the initial entry of the PSFS into the fan magazine field. FFT was a small hektographed affair, the price of which was five cents. It lasted but four issues, but it achieved success in that it projected the PSFS members into the whirlpool of active fandom. The discontinuation of FFT was merely a lull before the storm as far as activity in Philadelphia was concerned. Baltadonis assumed the editorship of the *Science Fiction Collector* and Madle published his *Fantascience Digest.* The fan magazine craze had hit Philadelphia in all its fury and many were the varied titles issued under the banner of *Comet Publications,* the PSFS fan publishing house. Train brought out his short-lived but ambitious *Science Adventure Stories,* which featured stories by many professional authors as well as by fans. Other titles were *Imaginative Fiction, The Meteor, Fantasy Fiction Pictorial,* etcetera.

The era of 1936-41 was one of incredible activity the world over. During these years occurred the fabulous fan feuds, hundreds of hektographed and mimeographed fan publications were issued, conventions and conferences were held annually—however, it would certainly not be within the scope of this article to even begin to describe the feverish activity which occurred. It can be mentioned that the *First World Science Fiction Convention* was held in NYC in 1939, and was followed by affairs in Chicago and Denver in 1940 and 1941 respectively. Also, every Fall the PSFS sponsored fan gatherings, termed "conferences," so as to differentiate from the term "Convention," as the meetings would not be competitive with any national or international conventions. It is suggested that the interested reader refer to *The Immortal Storm* by Sam Moskowitz, published by Henry Burwell, Jr., 459 Sterling Street, N.E., Atlanta, Georgia, which is a monumental history of science fiction fandom.

During the era of 1936-41 the membership rolls of the PSFS expanded considerably. The members were quite proud when Alexander M. Phillips, who had authored several stories in the professional magazines, deemed the club worthy of his membership. Phillips proved to be a very

popular member, and was elected President for 1940. The PSFS was universally recognized as one of the largest in the nation. But then came December 7th, 1941.

Within a period of several months practically all of the members entered the armed forces and, from all indications, this marked the demise of the PSFS for the duration. However, early in 1943 PSFS service fans were surprised to receive a copy of the *PSFS News*, which had been the bi-weekly publication of the organization. Oswald Train, the only inner-circle member remaining in Philadelphia, determined that he would not permit the PSFS to fade into oblivion, and he would, to the best of his ability, keep all of the PSFS members together and interested. These copies of the *PSFS News* were eagerly anticipated by the members who were scattered all over the planet. Train kept everyone informed as to just where the members were, and what they were doing. There is little doubt that the powerful organization of today would not be in existence had it not been for the activities of Oswald Train during the period 1943-45.

Finally came the cataclysmic conclusion to World War II. A.M. Phillips was the first to return, followed by Madle and Baltadonis. Then within a period of several months, other inner-circle members of the club rapidly returned to fandom: A. E. Waldo, Jack Agnew, John Newton, and others. L. Sprague de Camp, one of the top fantasy writers, became a member, and soon thereafter James A. Williams, prominent publisher and bookseller, joined the group, bringing with him several other fantasy enthusiasts, including his daughter, Allison. The meetings were so well-attended that it was decided that a club-room was not only advisable, but necessary. Livewire member Al Pepper discovered a suitable location, and the PSFS clubroom finally materialized after many years of fruitless discussion. Then, in the Fall of 1946, a delegation headed by Milton A. Rothman went to the Fourth World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles with the express intention of bidding for and obtaining the 1947 World Convention for Philadelphia. By an overwhelming majority the PSFS was voted the fifth annual affair. Philadelphia was being termed, "The New Mecca of Fandom," and there is little doubt that 1946 turned out to be one of the greatest years in the club's history.

1947 was a year of feverish

activity in Philadelphia. An executive convention committee, consisting of Rothman, Agnew, Madle, Train, and Phillips, devoted many hours to promoting the *Philcon* and their efforts were rewarded by the well-attended, interesting affair which ensued at the Penn-Sheraton Hotel during the Labor Day Weekend of 1947. It would be impossible to describe the varied and interesting speeches and meetings which were held, and the famous personages who attended. Just to mention a few of the greats of science fiction: John W. Campbell, E. E. Smith, George O. Smith, Theodore Sturgeon, Sam Merwin, L. A. Eshbach, Hubert Rogers, David H. Keller, Forrest J. Ackerman, Bob Tucker, and Sam Moskowitz.

During the years 1948-51 the club continued to expand. Many new members were added to its ever-expanding membership rolls: George O. Smith, H. Nearing, Jr., Alan E. Nourse, Dave Hammond, Tom Clareson, et cetera. Annual Fall Conferences were held; Williams and Train, with their Prime Press, put Philadelphia in the publishing limelight: a more centrally located section was obtained for the clubroom. The PSFS continued to maintain its position of respectable maturity in the world of science fiction, and was invariably well-represented at the World Conventions which followed that held in Philadelphia: Toronto (1948), Cincinnati (1949), Portland (1950), and New Orleans (1951).

Finally, in 1952, the PSFS sent almost twenty members to Chicago and, in a hectic campaign, was voted the convention for 1953. There is little doubt that the forthcoming convention, *The Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention,* will be the ultimate in science fiction affairs. Already an active and enthusiastic convention committee is working towards this goal. Just who comprises this committee is undoubtedly of interest and perhaps a few words anent these individuals will not be amiss:

Chairman: James A. Williams, science fiction fan, and partner in Prime Press.

Vice-Chairman: Thomas Clareson, Professor of English at University of Pennsylvania, long-time science fiction enthusiast.

Secretary: Oswald Train, Prominent bibliophile, and other partner in Prime Press.

Treasurer: Robert A. Madle, science fiction fan and collector for many years. One of the original members of the PSFS

The Executive Committee is supplemented by the following

members of the Convention Committee: L. Sprague de Camp, Jack Agnew, Milton A. Rothman, Dave Hammond, David A. Kyle, Lester del Rey, Irvin Heyne, Sol Levin, Joseph Mitchell, Joe Gibson, and Sam Moskowitz. It is interesting to note that the PSFS does not desire to take full credit for the forthcoming affair: the members are firmly convinced that the *Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention* will be an affair for the entire science fiction world, and the PSFS, although assuming the major portion of the labor involved, desires to share the production of this great convention with the rest of the fantasy world. It will be noted that David A. Kyle, who is editing the program booklet, Lester del Rey, who is Chairman of the Program Committee, and Joe Gibson and Sam Moskowitz, who are assisting in the publicity department, are not members of the PSFS. Remember: everyone interested in science fiction is invited to assist in this massive endeavor.

Great things are planned for the Labor Day Weekend of 1953: already arrangements have been made for the convention to be held at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, Philadelphia's finest. The convention hall is capable of seating 1500, and such an attendance is not unlikely. A wonderful program is being arranged, and there is no doubt that practically all of the famous personages of science fiction will attend this lavish affair. All the readers of science fiction will certainly want to assist the Convention Committee and, at the same time, keep fully informed of all Convention activities. This may be done by sending $1 to:

Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention
Membership Committee
Box 2019
Philadelphia, Penn.

This $1 will automatically make you a member of *The Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention Committee*, and you will receive a membership card attesting to that fact. Also, you will be mailed periodically copies of the *Convention Progress Report* which will keep you fully informed of all activities connected with the affair. Write to the Convention Committee at your earliest opportunity and plan to be in Philadelphia in 1953.

ON STREETS OF GOLD

BY IRVING E. COX, JR.

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

If man finds native, intelligent life on the planets, he's going to find it hard not to exploit them. And it will be harder to give up thinking in terms of past experience. Too hard. . . .

The buzzer clattered. Curt snapped down the intercom lever.

"Take-off in ten minutes, Commander Hallen. Is Commander Clark going down with us, sir?"

"Yes; there's nothing more we can do about it, Lieutenant Hughes."

"The men are saying, if Clark won't stay in the satellite—"

"Tell them their superstitions are showing." Curt snapped off the connection angrily. What did they think he could do? He had no other authority over Mike Clark, if persuasion wouldn't keep the man in line.

Curt pulled himself to the wall locker and took out his flight uniform, stripping off his loose-fitting fatigues. For a moment he hung in the air, weightless and naked. He was a young man, more than six feet tall, broad-shouldered and lean in the hips. Lithe muscle rippled beneath his copper skin.

His blood raced with excitement. Take-off in ten minutes! This was it—the last frontier, the last chance to colonize the planets.

Three years ago the Martian expedition had failed. Curt would never forget the bitter

story Commander Clark had told to the Board of Inquiry.

"Yes, I contracted the fever," he had answered, "but I had a light case."

"Still, you survived," the presiding Senator had repeated. "It seems curious, Commander, that none of the other men—"

"My expedition panicked. They all tried to crowd aboard the shuttle. I had no way of knowing which of them was infected; and it was an epidemic virus, remember. If I'd brought that back to Earth, millions would have died."

"So you abandoned your men."

"I had to make certain that no other Earth-expedition was ever sent to Mars."

After Clark's testimony even the most sympathetic Congressmen were unwilling to vote new appropriations for Solar exploration. Yet it was not in the nature of Americans to be content to stagnate. Having crossed the barrier into outer space, they were goaded by their psychological heritage to explore it. Congress reluctantly supplied a dribble of funds for an expedition to Venus.

As commander of the expedition, Curt Hallen supervised the building of the artificial satellite which had been established in a Venusian orbit. He drove the work crew with demoniac fury, for he believed fanatically in the feasibility of planetary colonization. In his mind Curt could hear the whispering voices of history, the ghosts of Columbus and Pizarro, of Lewis and Clark—all the great names that symbolized the conquest of the American West. The expedition to Venus was a part of the same tradition.

So Curt believed. But, at the same time, he was aware of a quiet irony: he was a full-blooded Comanche. To his people, the conquest of the West had meant disaster and degredation. Now he—a child of the dispossessed—blazed the conqueror's trail to Venus.

The intercom buzzed again. Ignoring it, Curt drew on his bulky, pressurized suit and left the satellite. He entered the shuttle-rocket. Air hissed into the lock. Curt racked his suit and pulled himself up the companion-tube into the lead-walled control chamber, where the thirty members of the expedition were already strapped into foam-cushioned shuttle chairs.

Curt signaled. The motor roared briefly. The rocket moved down into the Venusian mists.

Strapped beside Curt were Lieutenant Hughes, Curt's second-in-command, and Mike Clark. Clark was a member of the Venusian expedition by virtue of a Congressional appoint-

ment as special observer. He was an aloof and silent man, who had never become an integrated part of Curt's crew. Whenever Clark talked to the others, he seemed to convey a feeling of impending failure, without putting it into words.

"Of course we'll find no epidemic virus on Venus," he had said again and again. "Such a coincidence is impossible!"

Anyone listening to him somehow gained the impression that he expected precisely that—perhaps, even looked forward to it.

Yet it was not Clark's pessimism that made him an outcast. The truth was far simpler: Mike Clark was a commander who had abandoned his men to save himself. No matter what excuse he made, the service could not forgive him. They labeled Clark a coward.

Twenty minutes after the rocket slid into the Venusian wreath of clouds, Curt felt the first tug of planetary gravity. At the same time, Lieutenant Hughes brought into focus on the radar screen the first comprehensible ground pattern. The lieutenant jacked up the angle of her chair so she could read the screen more clearly.

Under any conditions, she would have been a striking woman. The skin-tight, silver-colored nylon flight uniform made her charms emphatic. Tall and statuesque, she was transformed into a goddess by the sheen of the uniform. Her yellow hair was cut very short. It curled in a golden crown above her face, which was unashamedly flecked with freckles.

Alice Hughes she was; a Kansas ranch girl—with a graduate degree in physics. She was one of seven women Curt had chosen for the expedition.

Curt studied the radar screen thoughtfully. The Venusian land mass was a scattered body of islands. For a landing site he chose a small, green island nestled close to the equator. At twelve thousand feet the rocket plunged through the cloud sphere that shrouded the planet. Through the periscope Curt saw the curve of Venus clearly. The land was covered with green foliage, and very flat; Curt saw no ranges of mountains, although here and there the ground ruffled up into low hills.

The first view of Venus was necessarily brief. Curt could not use rocket fuel to explore the land; that would be done later by means of the helicopter crowded in the hold.

The rocket glided into a landing on the equatorial island Curt had selected. While the chemists went into the airlock to analyze

the composition of the air, Curt rolled out the periscope and turned it in a full circle. He saw a black soil and tree-like growths with enormous leaves, towering a hundred feet above the rocket. It was near the close of the Venusian day and the gray twilight was descending; bleak shadows crept over the forest floor.

Suddenly Mike Clark caught Curt's arm, steadying the periscope. "Did you see that, Hallen?"

"Yes. A kind of gleam among the trees."

"Like a wall of water," Lieutenant Hughes suggested. "Ice, you think?"

"No; Venus is too hot."

"A wall," Commander Clark whispered. "But walls have to be built. Built by people!"

The chemists came trooping out of the airlock.

"It's good air, Commander Hallen!"

"A much higher oxygen content than ours; no other difference."

The whole expedition burst into excited talk and moved toward the port. Curt silenced them quickly. "Is there any evidence of a planetary virus?" he demanded. "Anything resembling Martian conditions?"

"We can't test for that, sir."

Curt turned to Mike Clark. "All right, Clark. You're the special observer; what do you think?"

"A wall; civilization! Hallen, we can't land!"

"Snap out of it. If there are people here, we can handle them. You said the Martian virus was fed by the flora. Does it look as if the same cycle exists here?"

With an effort, Clark shook off his daze. "I don't know. The plants aren't the same."

"Would you risk a landing?"

Commander Clark licked his thin lips and stared silently at the semicircle of faces. "Hallen, there may be people here, men with customs and Gods of their own and—" He broke off with a shrug. "Why ask my opinion? Go ahead; give the orders. Make your landing. There's no virus, Hallen." He spoke with an agonized bitterness, but for the first time he seemed to be sincere.

Curt opened the port. Clean, fresh air filled the cabin. It was damp and warm, fragrant with the odor of wet earth. One by one the members of the expedition followed Curt down the metal landing ladder. A warm mist was falling stealthily. The plants folded above the rocket caught the water on their huge leaves, occasionally spilling large, gleaming drops upon the

soil. The trunks of the plants arose like cathedral columns encircling the meadow where the rocket had landed. Curt heard no sound except the drip of the mist and the muffled clatter of metal upon metal, as two men began to build a fire in the shelter of the ship.

Alice Hughes moved quietly to his side. "It's strange," she whispered in awe. "The way the trees are growing, Curt."

It was the first time she had dropped military formality since they had left the Earth-satellite. The probing fingers of Curt's old, boyhood anguish twisted his soul; he wanted to turn away from her, and he could not.

"Strange? How, Lieutenant?"

"The trees make a pattern, a perfect circle around the meadow. They wouldn't—simply grow that way."

"Not on the Earth, no; this is Venus. We've no idea how these plants evolved."

"It reminds me of a park. And Commander Clark said there were people—"

The fire blazed up with sudden brilliance, spreading a yellow glow over the clearing. Lieutenant Hughes gasped and drew back against Curt. Just beyond the limit of the light Curt saw a circle of eyes gleaming in the darkness. He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her back toward the rocket.

The fire leaped higher. Vague shapes took form beneath the glittering eyes. Cold terror stabbed at Curt's soul, for the rocket was surrounded by a circle of silent, watching animals. They bore a faint resemblance to kangaroos, but their bodies were thickly scaled and their heads were flat-faced and round. They stood erect on two rabbit-like feet, and they had the additional support of short, thick, scaled tails. Their forefeet were long, thin and jointed, tapering into six-digited paws.

Apparently aware that they had been seen, the Venusian reptiles moved closer, while a singsong sound came from their throats. Their mouths hung open. Curt saw gleaming rows of sharp, white teeth.

The others moved backward to the landing ladder and began to pull themselves up into the safety of the cabin. But Curt knew they could not all escape. In the first hour, his expedition faced disaster! On Mars it had been a planetary virus; here, primitive reptiles. Commander Clark would have a second failure to report to Congress, and man's exploration of space would be over.

From the open port, a junior officer shouted down at the advancing animals. He swung a

Tommy-gun in his arm, spattering the damp ground with lead. The animals stopped and their sing-song howling ceased. But three of the monsters—leaders of the pack; or, perhaps, simply hungrier than the rest—continued to slither toward Curt.

Another burst of gunfire. The three reptiles lay dead. Curt expected the pack to leap upon him in fury; but nothing happened. The Venusian animals dragged away their dead and fled, silently, into the dripping forest.

Once inside the rocket, the members of the expedition seemed remarkably unperturbed.

"We should have anticipated animal life," one of the men said.

"In any case," another added, "we won't have any trouble after this."

"No; they're afraid of our guns."

The following morning systematic exploration of Venus began. The members of the expedition went everywhere in pairs and each of them was armed. The gentle mist was no longer falling, but the gray clouds never lifted and, throughout the day, rain fell at intervals. The temperature varied very little from a Fahrenheit of seventy-five degrees. On the first day the periphery of the exploration did not move far beyond the meadow where the rocket had landed. Detailed analyses were made of the soil and water, with favorable results.

"We could grow anything in this ground," a biochemist told Curt.

"Is there enough sunlight?"

"Apparently." The scientist gestured toward the towering plants. "Those things—they seem to be a species of ivy, by the way—they thrive here. The clouds never lift, Hallen, but Venus is closer to the sun than the Earth is."

The water was amazingly pure, and tasteless. It had only a microscopic mineral content, with no trace of iron.

On the second day the helicopter was wheeled out of the ship and fueled. An aerial photographer flew north from the landing meadow. In less than half an hour he returned, chattering with excitement.

"It looked like a town, I'll swear it!" he reported to Curt. "I couldn't get any closer because of the trees."

"Your eyes played you tricks," Curt answered. "Let's print your picture and see what you've got."

But when Curt and Alice Hughes studied the wet glossy films they felt a puzzled misgiving. Unmistakably square-cut structures of some sort were

visible beneath the giant ivy leaves.

"How far was it?" Curt asked the photographer.

"Half a mile. Want me to try for a clearer picture, sir?"

"No. Cruise south and see if you can pick up anything else."

When the pilot had left, Curt looked at the photograph again. "This'll have to be investigated on foot, Alice."

"I'll go with you, Curt."

"There may be danger—"

"From the overgrown lizards?" Lieutenant Hughes laughed and touched the gun strapped to her hips. "They've learned their lesson. They'll keep clear of us."

Curt strapped a portable radio transmitter to his shoulders, so that he could make emergency contact with the rocket. He carried a Tommy-gun as well as extra rounds of ammunition.

They still wore their silver-colored, nylon flight uniforms, because it was a durable material, as tough as leather. In the deep shadows of the ivy forest the air was hot and sticky. Curt pulled his zipper and stripped back his blouse, letting it hang loose from his waist.

"A man can make himself comfortable," Lieutenant Hughes said. "But a woman, of course—" She laughed for a moment; then her face turned serious. "Do you smell the earth, Curt? It's like a farm at home, after the spring plowing."

"Venus could make a good world, Alice."

"Will you be a colonist?"

"Maybe."

"We could be free, Curt; live our own lives; make the sort of—"

"We, Alice?"

"Now we aren't going through that again, Curt Hallen! I intend to marry you; the matter's settled."

"I'm an Indian."

"Oh, when will you grow up? We talked that out ten years ago, when you were a sophomore in college!"

"Age doesn't change the facts; I'm still an Indian."

"Grown men forget their childhood frustrations." She looked up into his eyes. "If you don't want me, Curt, why did you ask me to join your expedition?"

"Because—because you're a physicist, Alice."

"But not the best; not even a very good one. You're still trying to show off, Curt, like a little boy. All right, I'm impressed. Now let's get down to something important: when are you going to ask me to marry you?"

She reached for his arm as he swung ahead of her; but she stumbled over a root. She fell

into the trees but, instead of falling, she struck a transparent wall.

"Curt!"

He turned back and examined the surface of the wall. It did not have the slick, cold feeling nor the betraying surface reflection of glass.

Suddenly Alice screamed. A forest animal lurched at them through the undergrowth behind the wall. It was like an enormously enlarged beetle, with a tortoise armor. The beetle struck the wall and its teeth chattered against it. It eyed them with stalk eyes, and then darted to the left, only to meet another invisible barrier.

"The thing's caged in!" Lieutenant Hughes sighed her relief. But she added, in an awed whisper. "Curt, a wall has to be *built!*"

"We can't call it a cage. We can't apply our own experiences here. Who built it? Why? Where is he now?" Curt ran his hand over the wall again. "For all we know, this could be sap that's dripped from the ivy leaves. Maybe it formed by chance; maybe the plants are carniverous. We can't name any process, assume any hypothesis, until we've assembled data and classified it."

"Maybe, Curt, it's the scale of things that confuses us. Look around you! Ivy-plants a hundred feet high, armored beetles as large as elephants, lizards like kangaroos. On a scale of that sort, a man would be—"

"I read my last fairy tale twenty years ago."

He laughed cheerfully and locked his arm in hers. Two hundred feet beyond the trapped beetle, the path turned sharply and they came upon the structures which had been photographed from the helicopter.

A double row of yellow-walled buildings stood on both sides of a smooth, yellow road. But the place was empty and deserted. The gentle Venusian rain began to fall again as they entered the village. The street turned slick. Curt slipped and fell. He sat in a puddle of warm water fingering the surface of the road. Then he got up and walked to one of the buildings to examine the yellow bricks.

"Give me your guess," he asked. "What do you think these places are made of?"

She brushed her hand over the soft metal and her eyes widened. "Gold?"

With his knife Curt picked one of the corner bricks free. He beat the metal with the butt of his revolver. He was able to reshape the brick easily, without effort. He drew his fingernail

across the surface, and the mark left a clear gully in the face of the brick.

"If it's gold," he said, "it's nearly pure."

"Curt, the chemists say the oxygen content of the Venusian air is much higher than ours. As a matter of fact, our rocket is already beginning to rust. But there's no rust in this village."

"True; oxygen won't corrode gold."

"It's fantastic, Curt! Why would anyone build a village of a precious metal? It must have taken all the gold they've ever mined on Venus!"

"We're still thinking from our own point of view, Alice. There's no physical law saying that gold has to be rare."

"Even so, it's a ridiculous metal to build with. It's so soft, Curt!"

"Perhaps they have nothing else. There's no iron in the water." He clenched his fists. "But all that is pointless speculation. The important question is this: who built the village? If there are rational men on Venus, why haven't they taken some notice of our landing?"

He heard a faint shuffling at the end of the golden street and looked up quickly. A band of the scaled lizards was moving toward them. He darted a glance in the opposite direction; the other exit to the village was cut off as well.

Curt unslung his gun and sent a burst of lead blazing over the heads of the animals. Both groups stopped. Curt heard the soft mutter of their sing-song chatter. Furiously he turned the dials on his portable transmitter and called to the rocket for help. He thought he raised a response, but he could not be sure, for both groups of reptiles closed in at once. Curt fired point-blank into the pack, but he killed only one or two. His armament was no match for their overwhelming numbers. He heard Alice Hughes scream in terror as they tore her away from him.

A heavy blow struck the side of Curt's head. He had a vague recollection, later, of lying on the golden street while their clammy paws clawed over his naked chest, toying with the unzippered flaps of his nylon uniform. He tried to fight back, but they threw him roughly against the metal street.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying in a shuttle chair in the rocket, a padded bandage taped to his head. He sat up slowly, his head pounding with pain. Mike Clark smiled at him.

"It was just like a kid's movie," Clark commented. "We

arrived in the nick of time—with guns blazing—just as the lizards were carrying you off. We must've slaughtered a dozen of them before they dropped you and scurried for cover."

"Where's Alice?"

"My, Venus has made us informal!"

"Is she all right, Clark?"

Commander Clark spread his hands hopelessly. "Unfortunately, the lizards got away with her."

Curt tried to stand, but his head swam with pain. "Search for her! They can't—"

"Oh, we did, Hallen; we did. Those lizards can run when they've a mind to." Clark's cynical tone turned cold. "Had enough, boy? Why don't you call it off and go home? We've lost Lieutenant Hughes today; tomorrow it'll be one of the others. We don't belong on Venus, Hallen; we're Earth people. Mars was a mistake. Venus is—"

The pilot of the helicopter swung up through the open port, saluting briskly. "Commander Hallen, I've been out scouring the forest for signs of Lieutenant Hughes and—"

"Any luck?"

"No, sir, but I've located a colony of men about ten miles south of here. They've a funny kind of glass wall around their villages, but they're men, Commander! People like ourselves!"

"Another expedition?" Commander Clark demanded.

"It's possible, I suppose," Curt said. "We'll have to find out."

"But it's too late to do anything today, sir."

"Tomorrow's time enough; the villagers will still be here."

Beginning at dawn the next morning, the helicopter made seven flights shuttling men and arms to the broad, gravel plain outside the transparent walls of the Venusian villages. Ten men were left in the rocket, to continue the search for Alice Hughes.

Curt and Mike Clark went in the first flight. From the concealment of an ivy-tree at the crest of a low hill, they studied the colony. The villagers seemed to be primitives. They were tall, white-skinned, fair-haired, naked except for bright-colored paint streaking their bodies. They lived in huts built of leaves and branches; and they used rudimentary utensils made of gold.

The transparent wall enclosed an area of several square miles. In front of the wall was a water-filled moat, fifty feet wide, and teeming with a variety of reptilian life. Not one village but many lay behind the wall. While Curt and Clark watched, two

groups from different villages fought a bloody skirmish over a feeding ground. Their weapons were arrows and stone-tipped spears.

When the expedition was assembled, they moved up cautiously to the edge of the moat.

"So these are the Venusians," Commander Clark said dully. "The planet is ours, Hallen. We'll have no trouble eliminating this handful of savages."

"It isn't a matter of elimination. Our colonists will live on Venus with the natives; we'll teach them our technology."

"You speak, of course, from experience." Clark's words had the savage lash of a whip. "I'm sure some of the early American Colonials had a similarly noble view of our relations with the Indians—until the Colonials were strong enough to steal the Indian lands and destroy the Indian people."

Curt looked up at the transparent wall. "You're wrong, Clark," he said. "This isn't a primitive tribe, but a decadent remnant of a superior culture. These are the people who built the golden village; they invented the plastic walls, so they must have known something of science. Then a disaster occurred. My guess is they were overwhelmed by the lizards. The people built this refuge and fled to it. They filled the moat with sea monsters which could turn back any lizard attack, and they threw up the walls for additional protection. But, once they were safe, they were too worn out by the struggle to maintain their culture."

"It adds up to the same thing, Hallen. If we come to Venus with Earth colonies, we'll destroy the Venusians."

"These people need help. They can't survive without it."

Curt ordered a bridge thrown across the moat. Four men cut one of the ivy-trees on the edge of the clearing, splitting it down its ten foot diameter and binding the two pieces together. The work was not hard, for beneath a thin, outer crust, the wood was as soft as sponge. Sap gushed from the tree like water and slowly hardened into a plastic material like the wall. The tree made a sturdy, substantial bridge, light enough for two men to lift.

Curt was annoyed when he examined the saws after the tree had been cut. The surfaces of the blades, which had been washed by the tree sap, were thickly covered with rust; the teeth shattered into a red powder when he brushed them with his hand. Completely useless.

As soon as the bridge was lowered over the moat, Venusian lizards swarmed out of the ivy forest and attacked the expedition. They obviously understood the use of a bridge and intended to take advantage of it to reach their prey behind the wall. Curt discovered that the lizards were armed—after a fashion—with long, black snakes twisted around their forepaws. He assumed that the snakes were a reptilian parasite, comparable to the fleas and tics which inhabited Earth animals.

The fighting was finished quickly. The lizards suffered a score of casualties before they retreated. Only one of Curt's men died, when a lizard flung a writhing snake at the man's feet. The man sprang erect with a scream, and his dying fingers closed, paralyzed, upon the trigger of his gun. The bullets spattered an aimless arc in the air. When the lead struck the transparent wall, the material shattered and a twenty foot section beyond the bridge collapsed.

After the dust of battle had settled, timid groups of Venusians ventured out of their fortress and crossed the bridge. They moved cautiously toward the lizard bodies. When they were certain that the animals were dead, the Venusians fell upon them savagely, hacking them into bloody chunks and flinging the pieces to the reptiles in the moat.

Curt's expedition set up headquarters in a nylon tent just inside the broken wall. Throughout the day they attempted to establish linguistic communication with the natives, but without success. Three times during the day Curt communicated by radio with the men he had left in the rocket. By means of the helicopter they were slowly extending their search for Alice Hughes, but they had no favorable information to report.

At nightfall Curt's men built a campfire in the rain, and doled out rations. Venusians gathered around, watching them eat. Each time a can was emptied, the Venusians snatched it up eagerly, sometimes quarreling among themselves for its possession. Before the meal was over, one of the Venusians brought Curt a handful of his own utensils, pots and bowls crudely made from beaten gold. By gesture he indicated that he wanted to make a trade.

"Gold for tin," Commander Clark whispered acidly. "Snap it up, Hallen."

"They've gold in abundance," Curt replied. "They're curious about our non-yellow metals."

"Of course, Hallen; start the exploitation early!"

The trading continued for hours. The Venusians happily emptied their huts of all their possessions and carried away tin cans in exchange. When the tins were exhausted, the Venusians expressed a desire for guns, but Curt turned thumbs down.

"Don't make the old mistakes again," Commander Clark whispered. "Here, the conquest will be different. We made one error when we traded with the Indians: we sometimes gave them arms. That made it dangerous later on when our settlers set out to steal the Indian land."

"Clark, the single track of your mind is getting just a little monotonous."

"I'd forgotten, Hallen; you're an Indian and you know all about exploitation."

"You're missing the point. The past history of the Earth has no meaning to Venus."

"Granted —until the two cultures meet, as they have now. We think and act in terms of our own experience. We carry it with us, like a plague."

Curt reached into his nylon and took out a cigarette, lighting it thoughtfully. "You didn't take a plague to Mars, Clark," he said. "But you found one there."

"Yes, an epidemic virus." Clark eyed him steadily.

"Nothing else?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You know, Clark, a new expedition to Mars might be possible, even now. A man in a pressurized suit—"

Curt was interrupted by a tall, growling Venusian, who crowded close to observe his cigarette. He indicated that he wanted to try it. With a smile, Curt handed it over. The Venusian puffed and coughed. His face flushed scarlet and he flung the cigarette away. He staggered against the trunk of an ivy-tree and clung to it. When his spasm of nausea had passed, he crept to the spot where the cigarette lay, glowing red in the darkness. He picked up the butt and fled back to his native village.

Shortly after dawn the following morning, Curt was awakened by the sound of conflict. A bloody battle between two bands of Venusians swirled around the headquarters tent. Curt discovered why the natives had wanted tin cans. Over night they had beaten the metal into viciously effective spear and arrow heads; the Venusians were using their new weapons now before the metal rusted away.

After victory, the tribe came to trade again, bringing the spoils taken from the vanquished. But, instead of tin, they de-

manded cigarettes. Curt felt inexplicable misgiving, but he saw no sound reason to prohibit the trade. Eagerly the natives lugged their enormous piles of gold artifacts to the tent and carried away the fragile paper cylinders.

Thirty minutes later the tribe was gutted with insensibility. Men, women and children lay unconscious outside their huts, in the rain, spattered with their own filth. Others writhed in an orgiastic dance, grotesquely burlesquing their own ritual. They fought drunkenly among themselves, with cigarettes dangling from their lips. Some tottered from the bridge and were caught by the slimy monsters in the moat.

Throughout the day bands of natives staggered arm in arm across the wooden bridge to the clearing. They pranced, with mincing steps, toward the ivy-trees where the lizards lurked. The lizards sprang at them with their black, parasite snakes. Curt's men could not protect every Venusian party that ventured out beyond the walls. For hours the fringe of the clearing vibrated with their terrified screams as they died.

But by nightfall the orgy was over. The surviving Venusians were all inside the walls; more than a hundred were dead. The native villages were quiet, paralyzed with the exhaustion of a community hangover.

Wearily Curt's expedition built a fire and broke out their rations. While they were eating, the helicopter soared out of the darkness and settled on the clear area between the tent and the wall. The pilot shouted good-natured greetings to his companions, and then drew Curt aside. Silently he flashed a pocket light over the helicopter. Every piece of metal was red with rust.

"The truth is, Commander Hallen, the helicopter's falling apart. And the rocket isn't much better, sir. If we stay on Venus another week, we'll never get off the ground."

Curt fingered his lower lip thoughtfully. "We can't pull out until we find Lieutenant Hughes, or at least make sure—" He brought himself up short. His mind refused to frame the alternative. He glanced toward the others lounging around the campfire. Curt had no right to endanger them on the slim chance that he might save Lieutenant Hughes.

Then his eyes strayed to the pile of Venusian artifacts accumulated in a corner of the tent. And the grimness eased out of his face; he had his solution. "All right," he said to the pilot.

"Stay the night here; in the morning you can shuttle us back to the rocket."

"We're leaving Venus, sir?"

"Temporarily. We'll load the gold aboard the rocket and return to the satellite. Then we'll clean off the rust and gold-plate every square inch of exposed metal in the ship."

"Of course, sir! Gold won't rust. Any ship that comes to Venus after this—" The pilot threw back his head and laughed. "Can't you hear Congress howl when we tell them the colonists will have to have gold-plated shuttle rockets?"

The pilot went to make his billet in the tent. Curt stood alone by the helicopter, fingering the rust that had corroded the metal.

"You'll forgive my eavesdropping, Hallen?"

Curt whirled. Mike Clark stood in the darkness beyond the ship. In the falling mist his face glowed glossily pink from the light of his cigarette. He joined Curt, looking up at the helicopter speculatively.

"So our metals won't hold up in the Venusian atmosphere! That about finishes the prospect of a colony, doesn't it?"

"No."

"But our weapons would be useless. After a few weeks, the colonists would be at the mercy of the natives."

"You assume that conflict is inevitable, Clark; I don't."

"Perhaps not conflict; just exploitation. I've been down to the village, Hallen. It's quite a sight; you shouldn't miss it. They're recovering—most of them. But the tribe enjoyed its debauchery. They'll be back for more."

"I had no way of knowing what their nicotine reaction—"

"I don't suppose the white traders knew what would follow after they gave the first liquor to the Indians."

"I've issued orders, Clark; there'll be no more cigarettes for the Venusians, on any terms."

"Face the future honestly, Hallen! Think of the good-hearted souls—the upright people—who'll send out teachers to destroy Venusian customs, because by our standards they seem evil and barbaric. Think of the prim ladies who'll come to dress the Venusians in sacks, and teach them the disease of shame. It won't be pretty. It's the murder of a people, Hallen, and the responsibility is yours." Clark gripped Curt's arm with trembling fingers, "Hallen, the whites destroyed your people -your culture, your gods, your legends—on the misguided assumption that we were bringing you civilization. Take vengeance for that

now; or balance the account. Call it what you like! But don't let us repeat the same tragedy here."

"I have only one responsibility, Clark." Curt jerked his arm free. "I was commissioned to explore Venus for colonization."

"We've no right to grab the planets!"

"We had the brains to invent the machines, Clark; the machines give us the right."

"Solar exploration is a fluke of scientific research, Hallen. A by-product of war—that's the true measure of our civilization. Leave the Venusians to evolve their own culture in their own good time!"

"Mike, it's always easy to point out the shortcomings of our society." For the first time Curt used the Commander's given name, and he spoke very gently. "Disaster always makes more noise than success. Granted, we've made mistakes; but we've built a workable society, too. History is not necessarily a repetition of the crimes of the past. We've learned how to learn from the past. It'll be different when we build our colonies on Venus."

"That means you'll do nothing—"

"Nothing, Mike. We'll colonize Venus—our kind of men—and we'll make it our kind of world, for both ourselves and the Venusians."

A woman cried Curt's name from the tent, the knife-edge of fear in her voice. He and Clark ran back to the dying fire, to confront a circle of sullen Venusians, their arms loaded with gold trade goods. The natives wanted nothing but cigarettes. When these were not at once forthcoming, the Venusians turned belligerent.

Curt tried to interest them in a miscellany of things—parts of nylon uniforms, spare zippers, toothbrushes, even canned sardines.

But the Venusians would not be put off. Suddenly one of the men hurled a stone axe which grazed Curt's shoulder; the mob sprang at them. Curt's men were forced to use their guns to turn them back. Four of the Venusians were shot, and the pilot of the helicopter was beaten to death.

Throughout the night the Venusians circled in the shadows beyond the tent, barking among themselves. Judging from the sounds they made, Curt guessed that the size of the mob grew steadily. Occasionally a spear lashed out of the darkness and struck the ground near the fire. Sleepless, Curt kept watch, a Tommy-gun cradled in his arm.

In the light of dawn he saw hundreds of Venusians milling in front of the expedition tent. As the light brightened, their barking grew louder. Here and there small groups burst into frenzied dancing.

Outside the walls Curt saw a large phalanx of lizards moving stealthily across the clearing toward the bridge. He hoped the new threat might deflect the Venusian attack, but the interest of the natives did not waver.

A purposeful band of Venusians moved toward the tent, symbolically offering trade goods. Hoping that surrender would give him the time he needed to evacuate the expedition, Curt flung them four cigarettes. But the gesture precipitated the attack. The Venusian delegation fell quarreling over the spoils; and the screaming mob surged forward. Curt backed into the tent. Behind an improvised barrier the guns began to chatter. The first wave of Venusians fell; the others stopped thirty feet from the tent, screaming and dancing and brandishing their spears.

"We have to push them back, or we won't be able to get out," Commander Clark shouted to Curt above the din. "A small bomb ought to scare them off."

"The bombs are all in the rocket, and the pilot—"

"I can fly the helicopter, Curt."

"Thanks. Thanks, Mike." Curt held out his hand. After a long hesitation, Clark shook it limply. He turned and scurried through a rain of arrows to the helicopter. As the ship rose from the ground, the second wave of Venusians closed upon the tent. Across the clearing the lizards moved closer to the bridge.

Curt stood up to fire at the mob. A spear struck his shoulder, spinning him back into the tent. He pulled himself groggily to his feet. The others were firing frantically at the swirling naked bodies. Curt's arm hung limp and numb. Blood spurted through a rent that had been torn in his nylon blouse.

"Hallen! Can you hear me?" It was Clark's voice, filtered by the two-way radio at the back of the tent. "Unfortunately, you can't answer, Hallen; I put your transmitter out of commission this morning. Under the circumstances, it seemed desirable for you not to be able to contact the rocket again.

"I want you to know the truth, Hallen. You'll say I'm mad, of course. You're welcome to your opinion. Perhaps I am. Who knows? Madness is a condition differently defined by every society. And when a whole culture has gone mad, who can point out

the sane man? For we are mad, you know.

"You asked me once what had happened on Mars. You know the truth, now. There was no virus. Nothing but civilization. A friendly, naive people. I could visualize us hauling them back to our zoos, or cooing over them in the parlor, and—

"I'll do the same thing here—with variations, naturally. Even a Congressional committee wouldn't swallow that virus story a second time. I'll tell the men in the rocket you've ordered me to take it back to the satellite—to prevent further rusting. But we won't stop there, Hallen. Somewhere in space I'll open the airlock, and we'll have our monument, you and I—an empty cubicle forever darting across the face of eternity. After two disasters, it'll be a long time before Congress appropriates more funds for Solar exploration. Perhaps, in the interval, Mars and Venus will grow up enough to meet us on our own terms."

Curt pulled himself slowly to his feet, swaying dizzily. He saw the lizards were crossing the bridge, driving the Venusian natives back with their parasite snakes. Curt raised a rifle and aimed it at the helicopter which still floated overhead; but, before he could pull the trigger, the ship swept away and was hidden by the ivy-trees.

Curt collapsed. The battle was over. Lizards swarmed into the tent. One of Curt's men weakly raised his pistol. The lizard's forepaws fluttered, and in a sing-song squeal he cried human words.

"You safe, all! Come to us!"

Unconsciousness shut down upon Curt's mind.

When he opened his eyes, he lay on a foamy, green pallet in a low-ceilinged, gold-walled room. A soft, transparent, stickily gelatinous material was heaped over his wounded shoulder.

"At last, Curt!"

He turned his head. Alice Hughes sat on a couch beside him, her leg bound to a board by a mound of the gelatine.

"I broke it when they captured me," she explained. "That's why I couldn't come myself and tell you the awful mistake we've made. They wouldn't hear of it; they said my leg wouldn't heal properly. And, Curt, there was so little they could do themselves, because they hadn't learned any of our words yet."

"They?"

"The lizards. They were at such a disadvantage against us. They're not at all warlike, and they have no weapons except

their trained snakes. They've brought you to their capital. I've seen some of the city, Curt, and—"

"You mean that gold village we found in the forest?"

"Gracious, no! Those buildings were simply concession booths." She laughed. "I know it isn't funny. We've lost the rocket; we've no way of going home—ever—because Venus has no native metal except gold; and there are only twelve of us still alive—four women and eight men. Yet it's our own fault, Curt; we were such awful fools! You even told me the truth. At least you know it in words, although emotionally—"

"I knew the truth?"

"You said we couldn't interpret Venus in terms of our own past experiences, but we did precisely that, from the time we first saw the lizards. On Venus it's the reptile that evolved rationality; that hypothesis never occurred to us."

"But there were men behind the transparent wall, Alice!"

"The most dangerous animal species on Venus; men only in the superficials of physical appearance. Curt, we have to make new definitions. Man is a synonym for the cerebral cortex, for the ability to solve problems. Man doesn't mean a biological shape, automatically superior to every other animal because the shape happens to resemble ours. Think about that transparent wall, Curt, and the enormous beetle we saw trapped in the forest. I was right, remember? I said the beetle was in a cage. If we'd looked farther, we'd have found others—all in neat, natural settings for easy viewing. I called it a park, too, Curt."

"You mean to tell me, Alice, that we landed our rocket in—"

"On the one Venusian island where we could make the mistake we did. We'd have found their cities on any of the others. We acted on a totally false hypothesis, Curt, because we had insufficient data, and we classified it according to our own past experiences."

He smiled and relaxed on the green lounge. "I wonder what would have happened, Alice, if Venusians had landed on the Earth at—say—the San Diego Zoo?"

"Turn your question around, Curt. Would we have recognized them as rational people as quickly as they did us?"

"I'll answer that with another question: how long does it take a man to change his basic definitions? Perhaps we're fortunate we'll never know the answer. I'd hate to believe that Mike Clark was right."

STRANGE

BY RICHARD K. SNODGRASS

ILLUSTRATED BY EBERLE

Nuc had been the first sign of peace after Bikini. But now Chaffin was carrying Nuc back—dead—to a too peaceful world. Death came on great wings and in tiny, creeping carriers.

Cradling the dog gently in his arms, Dan Chaffin walked along the dusty, country road. Green ragweeds bordered the road. Each weed was sprinkled with an even film of powdery dust, not made splotchy by raindrops. It had not rained for three weeks.

"Same every June, isn't it, Nuc?" he asked the dog.

The animal made no response.

Not thinking, he glanced down at the brown and white form in his arms, then brought his eyes up quickly, wanting to force the image from his mind. The sightless, staring eyes. The limpness.

He kept forgetting. It didn't seem possible, but his mind would not accept the dog's death, would not keep his eyes from glancing down at the animal.

He walked along, wanting not to think of it, his blue shirt dark with sweat, his arms numb from the weight. He looked at the side of the road and noticed a cocklebur in the road dust. How many had he cut from the brown and white coat? Five dozen? Six. Impossible to say, after so many years together.

It was always the same, though. Nuc would come up, his pointed ears laid back, his brown eyes apologetic. "Sorry, Dan," the brown eyes seemed to say, "but I caught another bur in my

coat. Can you cut it out, Dan? It's worse than a flea."

Dan smiled, remembering when Vernadsky, the Russian physicist, and he had found Nuc alive after Phase-Seventeen at Bikini. They had been checking the Russian armor section of the island when they found him, trembling and whining, his ears laid back, huddled under the wreckage of a heavy tank—and his coat had been covered with sand burs.

Nuc, sole survivor of the tests that ended war (the newspapers and politicians had said), who could not win the battle of the bur or flea.

But now he was dead. Sightless. Staring.

And carrying him into Monmouth like this, he hated the thought of facing them. They would blame him. Whether he lied or told the truth, the people of Monmouth would say it was his fault the dog was dead. The truth, though simple, would be unacceptable for the townspeople. They would say it had been his fault even if he explained how Nuc just would not go down the dark mine shaft. They all knew how the dog shied away from dark places, and God knows the place was dark enough, abandoned these past thirty years.

He wondered if anyone else had thought to check the mine during those years. Doubtful. They were too busy basking in their blissful, peaceful occupations. With no more anxiety about the war, they had given up the search for uranium. They had given him up, too, and a lot of other technicians. All over the world, technicians—war technician—found themselves receiving unemployment checks as soon as the *Peace Of Bikini* was signed.

He thought about Vernadsky, wondering if he was wandering around some Russian countryside, checking abandoned mines and carrying a dead dog in his---

He picked up his step. Get to town and get it over with. Wouldn't be too many people uptown on a Tuesday morning. He would see Doc Cudd, first. Everyone knew and trusted old Doc. They had every reason to. He was the best veterinarian and mayor Monmouth had ever had. Understanding, too. He would be able to explain the dog's death to them. Yes, the sooner he got there and got it over with, the better.

The powdery road dust puffed up in front of his boots, and in the gray dirt the soles made a muffled sound . . . Sound!

He stopped, and for the first time since leaving the mine was conscious of the throbbing si-

lence around him. No robins or honeybees or frogs. No roaring jets overhead. No tractors in the cornfields around him.

Nothing but his own heavy breathing disturbed the intense quiet, and he thought of those silent minutes before dawn—the time when the earth seems dead.

He moved on, almost running, anxious for the people and noise and movement of the town, a mile and a half away . . .

The public square was quiet.

There were no shopping women having trouble with their kids, and only three cars were parked around the grassy, tree-shaded Square. Odd, he thought. Almost identical to the way it was at six this morning when Nuc and I left for the mine.

Even the usual six or seven old-timers weren't sitting on the green benches over there, but he guessed they'd quit arguing long enough to go to dinner. And Frank, the cop, was slumped across the steering-wheel of the patrol car. Can't blame him for that. Town's dead. Not a lawbreaker within miles.

Taking the sidewalk across the Square, he tried to keep his eyes from the large monument, relieved that the oldtimers weren't there to eye him—and see the dog. They would have looked at the dog, then at the monument, then back at the dog. They wouldn't say anything, but their eyes would yell, "Old Nuc's dead, an' Dan Chaffin's t' blame, sure."

The damned monument!

The damned marble Nuc with the little brass plate hanging around his neck:

TO DAN CHAFFIN'S DOG
"NUC"
Only living survivor
of the seventeen phase
Bikini tests of April
and May, 1962, which
brought peace and security
to the world.
The People Of Monmouth

Really the people of the world, he thought, remembering the day *AP*, *Time*, *UP* and *Life* reporters came for stories and pictures, followed by the President's citation letter.

He'd been a good dog, a friend, before the publicity, but afterwards the town held dinners for him, wrote poetry about him, and put up the damned monument. Overnight, he became Monmouth's property: overfed, spoiled, famous. They would blame him when it was their fault. Too much publicity. Too many steaks. Only it hadn't lasted long enough for them to kill him outright. Nuc and he had gone down to the Mississippi to fish, hunt and loaf Nuc back into some kind of condition.

Five years ago, he thought,

crossing the intersection. A long time. A wasted, long time to be a peace casualty.

He glanced down Main Street and saw four cars and two semi's parked in front of Hawcalk's Cafe. Funny there were only two other cars parked along the street. Then he noticed Bert-dumb's Milk truck and Bowmen's Garbage pick-up further down the street. Slowest morning he'd ever seen. Main was like this at six, seven in the morning, but never at eleven or twelve. Just one of those things. Everyone eating at the same time.

He felt the heat of the pavement inside his boots, wanting to wipe the sweat. No wonder the farmers are complaining for rain. Most anything from the sky would be welcome, even a cloud.

He stopped, his hand on the doorknob of Doc's office door. Funny, the old boy drawing the blinds in the middle of the day? He tried it—locked. Well, he'd be back in a minute. Probably out for dinner.

He leaned back against the blue tile wall, and the coolness of it was relaxing against his shirt. Now, if only the town wasn't too bitter about the—he glanced quickly back at the drawn Venetian blinds, feeling a light finger of fear move across his stomach muscles. Then the finger began jabbing, almost making him sick. The sweat was drying on his face, and suddenly, in the shadow of the doorway, he was cold.

The impossible was again around him.

Everywhere, the intense, beating silence. It had come in from the road and now stood on Main Street. As he heard it, vermin crawled through his scalp—and the second realization exploded in his mind. Twelve o'clock noon on a sunny street running through Monmouth, Illinois—twelve o'clock and he had not yet seen one walking, breathing, talking human being. Only Frank, the cop, who had been slumped across the—

He swallowed, stepping back into the blinding sunlight.

"Hello?" he asked weakly, then yelled, "Hello! Hello, there! Anyone? Hello?"

The silence yelled back.

The muscles in his arms were tight with cramps from the dog's weight as he turned and half-ran toward Quinn's Place. Quinn'd be open. Always was. He'd order a beer and tell Quinn all this. Quinn'd talk back in his loud voice, laughing and explaining today was a holiday. "Everyone in Monmouth's gone to a parade over in Galesburg," Quinn would say. Then he'd pay up, drink the

beer from the cool, sweating glass and walk outside in time to see them coming back from the next town, their cars clogging Route 34.

The dog was heavy, and he wondered if he should put him down. Come back for him later. No. He couldn't. Anyone saw him do it they wouldn't like it.

He hurried past Ebersole's Magazine Shop, Parolee's Dress Shop, the white dust-covers thrown across the dress-racks—past the R. Atlass Rendering Service office, Cort Cigar Store and Dart's Used Cars showroom. In front of Quinn's, he stopped.

The door stood open. It always did. Entering, blinking in the almost dark room, smelling the dead beer, he felt a wild relief sweep over him. He wanted to sing and shout. The crazy ordeal was over because even though Quinn wasn't around, Dix Joseph, drunk as usual, was slumped over the polished mahogany bar.

Never in his life did he think he would be glad to see the old fool, but now he felt a warmness, even kinship toward the drunk. He'd buy him a drink, good whiskey, tell him about the dog and find out why they had all gone to Galesburg.

"Dix," he said, laying the dog on a red leatherette stool. "Dix, you old liar, wake up. Drinks on me."

That's funny? "Dix? Dix!"

He grabbed the old man's collar, jerking up—then let go when he saw the face, the eyes. Cold, sightless, staring eyes. The body slid slowly to the spit-covered floor.

He heard the sobbing, screaming voice, and recognizing it, forced his lips shut. He stared down at Dix for an unbelieving minute, feeling the spasmodic tremble wrenching his body, then scooped up the dog, turned and ran out the door and down the street, his bootsteps echoing among the still buildings, his heart pounding . . . pounding . . . pounding . . .

"Lord, God," he murmured, gasping for air, "have mercy on—"

He stopped, numb with fear, in the open door of Hawcalk's Cafe, the trucks and cars parked at the curb behind him. The spasmodic jerks possessed his body, and he began sobbing, biting his lower lip. They were posing. A joke. Not possible. Impossible!

"Get up!" he screamed, the sobs growing. "Get up from the floor!"

But the nine people did not move—remaining by the counter and tables, sprawled grotesquely,

each staring in a different direction.

"Lord, Christ in Heaven . . . Father and—" He broke off, walking to the main counter, the dog suddenly unbearably heavy. He dumped him on the chip-paint counter like a sack of grain, then straightened up slowly, staring at a plate of cold ham and eggs a foot from the dog's tail. They don't look very good, he thought quietly, bringing his eyes back to the animal.

"You're to blame," he whispered hoarsely, looking down at Nue as if he were a newspaper spread on the counter. "You wouldn't go down the shaft and you were dead when I came out—you're to blame and—" His hands lunged down, grabbing the dog around the neck, feeling the cold collar and fur squeezing tighter . . . tighter . . . watching the eyes bulging . . . straining . . . bulging . . .

Then he let go quickly, hearing the body thump back against the counter. He let go because of the tickling sensation on his right forefinger. He planted his elbows on the counter, and looked closely, his mind charged with hope—with fear. When he saw what it was, his scream filled the cafe, vibrating a loose plate glass in the pie case.

The scream died and he stood there, frozen, an insane chuckle rising in his throat. The chuckle became a laugh; the laugh a scream as he watched what was causing the tickling sensation crawl slowly up his finger toward his knuckle.

It was a flea.

And from outside, overhead, like the mild hum of a mosquito somewhere in a dark bedroom, he heard the ships—returning.

Next month, Erik van Lhin brings us the picture of a planet in the midst of outside revolution, if you can imagine such a thing. When Earth's police land in the mess that the administration has made, Bruce Gordon could well wish that he were in the wastes of Mercury. What can a man who is firmly entrenched on both sides, and precariously balanced between—all at the same time—do in a situation which neither police force can handle? And, of course, there's Sheila Corey to help the works move with their growing untrustworthiness.

There'll also be another story by Irving E. Cox, Jr., which is built on the background he has established in his story in this issue. The problems of adjusting to an alien race are nothing, compared to those of adjusting to one's fellow men—and women.

BOOK REVIEWS:

THE DISSECTING TABLE

by DAMON KNIGHT

Readers who expect bloodshed will be disappointed this time: either an absolutely appalling number of first-rate science fiction books has been published in the last couple of months, or else something rather peculiar has happened to my spleen.

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE, by Wilson Tucker. Rinehart, 217 pp., $2.50. I hereby set myself up as an oracle pro tem; this department's first prediction—and its only one to date, unless I've mislaid one—has come in on the nose, a lot sooner and more gratifyingly than I ever expected. Reviewing *The City in the Sea* (SFA, November '52), I wrote: "Regrets and apologies to Bob Tucker, who will almost certainly deserve and get better treatment next time his name appears in these pages."

The City, as I said in a loud and irritated voice, was a bad book; *The Long Loud Silence* is not merely a better one, which after all wouldn't be tremendously surprising, but a phenomenally good book; in its own terms, it comes as near perfection as makes no difference. The plotting is close-knit without being contrived; the style is compact and eloquent; the characters, in Faulkner's words, "stand up on their hind legs and cast a shadow."

This is the story of what happens when the eastern third of the United States is quarantined, turned into an enclave of horror, as the result of an atomic and bacteriological bombing that wipes out every major city east of the Mississippi and leaves its survivors permanently infected—plague carriers, each one a potential center of death and destruction. To prevent the plague from spreading to the rest of the nation, what's left of the government and the army sets up a cordon sanitaire along the Mississippi. From one point of view, those east of this line who are now dead are the lucky ones; the others have nothing to look forward to but a long slow fight for survival whose end is foreknown. For them there is no real hope left.

Tucker does not spend much time speculating on how and why this state of affairs came about; this is reasonable; his protagonist has no way of finding out and doesn't much care . . . or, to put it another way, the book is exclusively concerned with the human consequences of the attack, not with its causes. The bombing, the plague and the quarantine together make up the one primary assumption which convention allows to science-fantasy writers; readers have before this swallowed much unlikelier ones for the sake of the story.

The protagonist, ex-GI Russell Gary, is billed on the dust jacket as a "professional heel," which he isn't. Even disregarding the totally irrelevant and inaccurate adjective, Gary is no heel: he is simply a very ordinary American male, thirty years old, with a little more than the average intelligence but no extraordinary aptitudes, interests or attainments, who wants to go on living even in the hell that virus and quarantine have made of the eastern U. S.

A man would either be quick, or dead.

That's the only choice Gary has; not a single thing he does is conditioned by anything else. This, in fact, is precisely the thing that makes the book as good as it is: Gary is no hero and no heel, neither superman nor subman; he is not a symbol of anything and he falls into no moralistic category—he's a human being, and he's completely believable.

He has a normal, human hunger for companionship, and a normal, human callousness for the misery of others.

Gary wants to get back across the river, to the warm, familiar world that no longer exists on this side. Eventually, with resourcefulness, patience and single-minded determination, he does it . . . only to find that he spreads death wherever he goes; he leaves a widening track of corruption behind him; he can never stay anywhere longer than a day; he is as irrevocably cut off from humanity as before. But the main thing is still to survive. He recrosses the river and, as food stocks dwindle and the hunter and the hunted inevitably become one, follows his narrowing path with an undiminished will to live. At the book's end, he again encounters the girl with whom he had a brief affair at the beginning . . . each of them stalking the other. From this point, there are only two likely conclusions, of which, possibly on the insistence of his publishers, Tucker has chosen the less gruesome and perhaps slightly the less logical; but this minor weakness, if it is a weakness at all, is easily forgiveable. The book is honest, courageous, deeply felt,

painstakingly realized. From where I sit, it makes the future of science fiction as literature look measurably brighter.

WITCHES THREE, by Fritz Leiber, James Blish and Fletcher Pratt. Twayne, 423 pp., $3.95. This handsome volume contains two old favorites and a surprise—Leiber's *Conjure Wife* from *Unknown,* Blish's *There Shall Be No Darkness* from *Thrilling Wonder,* and a long (199 pp.) never-before-published novel by Fletcher Pratt, *The Blue Star.*

Taking them in order, *Conjure Wife* is easily the most frightening and (necessarily) the most thoroughly convincing of all modern horror stories. Its premise is that witchcraft still flourishes, or at any rate survives, an open secret among women, a closed book to men. Under the rational overlay of 20th-century civilization this sickly growth, uncultivated, unsuspected, still manages to propagate itself.

Tansy Saylor, the wife of a promising young sociology professor at an ultra-conservative small American college, is, like most women, a witch. She is also an intelligent, modern young woman, and when her husband happens to discover the evidence of her witchcraft (not his own easy advancement, which he ascribes to luck, but certain small packets of dried leaves, earth, metal filings, etc.) he's able to convince her that her faith in magic is compounded of superstition and neurosis. She burns her charms; Norman Saylor's "luck" immediately turns sour.

Leiber develops this theme with the utmost dexterity, piling up alternate layers of the mundane and outre, until at the story's real climax, the shocker at the end of chapter 14, I am not ashamed to say that I jumped an inch out of my seat. From that point onward the story is anticlimax, but anticlimax so skillfully managed that I am not really certain I touched the slip-cover again until after the last page. Leiber has never written anything better . . . which, perhaps, is all that needed to be said.

Conjure Wife applies some of the principles of scientific methodology to the occult, and spices it with such modernisms as tape recorders and Rupert mirrors. *There Shall Be No Darkness* attempts something intrinsically much more difficult—rationalizing the traditional werewolf story all the way down to the bottom, leaving no residum of the occult at all. Blish does a spectacular job of it, taking no more liberties with biology than we are accustomed to expect from an ordinary science-fiction story about totipotency, longevity or bifocal brains.

He dodges no issues; the traditional effectiveness of wolfsbane and

rosemary is explained: " 'The herbs, for example, are antispasmodic—they act rather as ephedrine does in hay-fever, to reduce the violence of the seizure.' " So is that of silver: " 'It poisons the pinearin-catalysis.' " He hurdles the crucifix problem rather heavily—" 'perhaps solely psychological' "—and comes a determined cropper on the issue of the evening-clothes-into-pelt transformation, than which nobody could do more. The story isn't, to me, in the least believable, but it is as consistent as it could possibly have been made within the terms Blish set himself; and it's continuously exciting, as well as being informed with that keen sense of the tragic and the incongruous which is this writer's strongest asset. I see that I have forgotten to mention the witch, who is not important anyhow except as a straight man and an excuse to get this story into the book. The story belongs to Jarmoskowski, probably the most likeable werewolf in the literature; it's his valedictory plea—rejected by the witch—that provides the title.

The Blue Star, which, on several counts, ought to have turned out to be the weakest story in the book, is nothing of the sort. A certain brace of science-fantasy editors whose editing and writing I esteem (although I'm sometimes at loss to account for their opinions) recently brushed this novel aside with a reference to George U. Fletcher's *Well of the Unicorn*—which I haven't read, unfortunately, so I can't say; perhaps *The Blue Star* is derivative. If so, I don't see that it matters; it's a magnificent job of writing, a gem-perfect example of a branch of pure fantasy so rare nowadays that I was beginning to think it was extinct—the dream-world story. The distinction between this and all other types—Utopias and Dystopias, interplanetary stories, projections of the Earth into the distant past and future—is that the dream-world must be completely insular, without the smallest contact with the mundane universe either in space or in time; one touch of reality withers it.

There has never been much of this—never, at any rate, enough to suit me. I have the impression that there used to be a fair amount in *Weird Tales* fifteen or twenty years ago; more recently, the only magazine fantasy writer I can think of who has tried it is Jack Vance, in his brilliant *The Dying Earth.*

The Blue Star is presented frankly as a dream. In an urbane and witty prologue, three men begin by discussing the possibility of other inhabited worlds, and end by postulating a single one: a world in which "somebody might have found the key to something as basic in [the field of witchcraft] as gunpowder was to the physical sciences."

The reader is caught up in the dream of a world strangely like ours and strangely different—a world where witchcraft is real, but not, as he might expect, one where witchcraft rules. This is no fuzzy fairyland, but a clear and detailed projection of a society obeying its own laws, with its own manners, customs, religions, history. It's a quasi-medieval world in which magic, instead of being the Church Militant's fictive scapegoat, is a real force, suppressed, legislated against—and used.

The tale is that of two unwilling lovers: Lalette, the reluctant witch, and Rodvard the bewildered revolutionary, whose masters set him cold-bloodedly to seduce her and so obtain the Blue Star . . . for this is one of the ironies of the true witchcraft, that its most potent weapon, the Blue Star, gives no power to the witch herself; but once she is united in the Great Marriage (i. e., first intercourse), it passes to her husband, who can use it to read the minds of others for as long as he is faithful to her. Rodvard is in love with another woman, and Lalette, in the beginning, loves no one; but as the tides of fortune take them on separate, Candide-like journeys half across the world, the Great Marriage endures—and like many another ingloriously begun, proves stronger in the end than what they may take to be their own desires.

Three footnotes, one about *The Blue Star,* the others about the volume as a whole. For the main section of the novel, not counting prologue and epilogue, Pratt has devised a special style and manner to complement and embellish his subject. Although he uses several contrived stylistic devices—parenthetical asides, oddities of punctuation, and the like—the effect is not strained but astonishingly fluent and graceful.

John Ciardi's introduction, *A Plea For Witches,* is penetrating and good-humored, erudite without being pedantic—a notable achievement.

And to cap it all, Sidney Solomon's book design is impressively fresh and good.

Watch Twayne.

If they can keep their future projects up to this standard, they're sure to reach the top in short order.

THE ROCKET PISTOL

BY ROBERT D. SAMPSON

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

Hawk-Nose gave Bill a bright red Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol, but warned him that telling where he got it meant death. Bill didn't tell, even when the whole police force wanted to know.

"Here's a nice new Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol for you," the hawk-nosed man said. He held it out.

Bill shuffled indecisively, his eyes greedy for the toy.

"Don't you want it?" Hawk-nose asked. The smile never left his narrow lips, but suddenly his eyes changed—twitched around at a far-off shrill wail. "It's a gift for you. You can have it."

"For nothing?" Bill asked. He placed one finger on the long barrel, colored as bright red as the rockets that hurtled down from space stations in the upper air. It was beautiful.

"Take it," Hawk-nose snapped. He thrust the pistol into Bill's hand, and his eyes jumped and became very small. The thin siren wail grew more distinct. "Now remember. If anybody asks you where you got this, you say you found it."

Bill turned the pistol in his hands. It was beautiful and very light, but it was not plastic. He clicked the trigger, a small golden semi-circle that slipped in and out of the butt. "Bpt-zfpt!" the pistol grated. A sickly stream of blue-green sparks showered from the opening of the muzzle.

Hawk-nose twisted back on one leg. His face contorted and his eyes went large and full of white flecks. "Watch out," he snarled, seizing Bill by one small shoulder. "You crazy kid. What you trying to do?"

He stared over Bill's head at the corner of the garage. Twisting in the big man's grip, Bill stared too. He could see nothing that should have terrified Hawk-nose. Nothing to make his knife-blade mouth tighten quivering in one corner.

"You get along now," Hawk-nose ordered.

"Yes, sir," said Bill.

"Don't you tell anybody where you got this." He pointed to the pistol and his face went horrible with gleaming teeth. "If you do, I'll come back and take it away. And then I'll kill you. I can hear everything you're saying. And if you say anything, I'll kill you."

Fear glided over Bill with piercing little feet. Not fear of death, but a sudden sick wave of fear that Hawk-nose might take the pistol back. Dropping his eyes, he clutched the scarlet handle and nodded.

The sirens were close now, behind the houses and wailing shrilly.

"Go on," snapped Hawk-nose. "Get away from me."

Bill ran, the pistol hotly wet in his clenched hand. When he looked back, Hawk-nose was gone. Cold coiled in his small stomach. The emptiness of the alley was a standing threat, because somewhere, the tall man with the narrow space-tanned face was listening, ready to return, ready to take back the pistol with the unpredictable cruelty of adults.

He bolted out of the alley, ran down the main street holding the Hyper Atomic Rocket Pistol tight against his chest, listening for the sound of Hawk-nose running after him.

A white police jet twisted to a stop across the mouth of the alley. At the same moment, at the other end of the block, another jet performed the same maneuver. Gun-holding patrolmen filled the street.

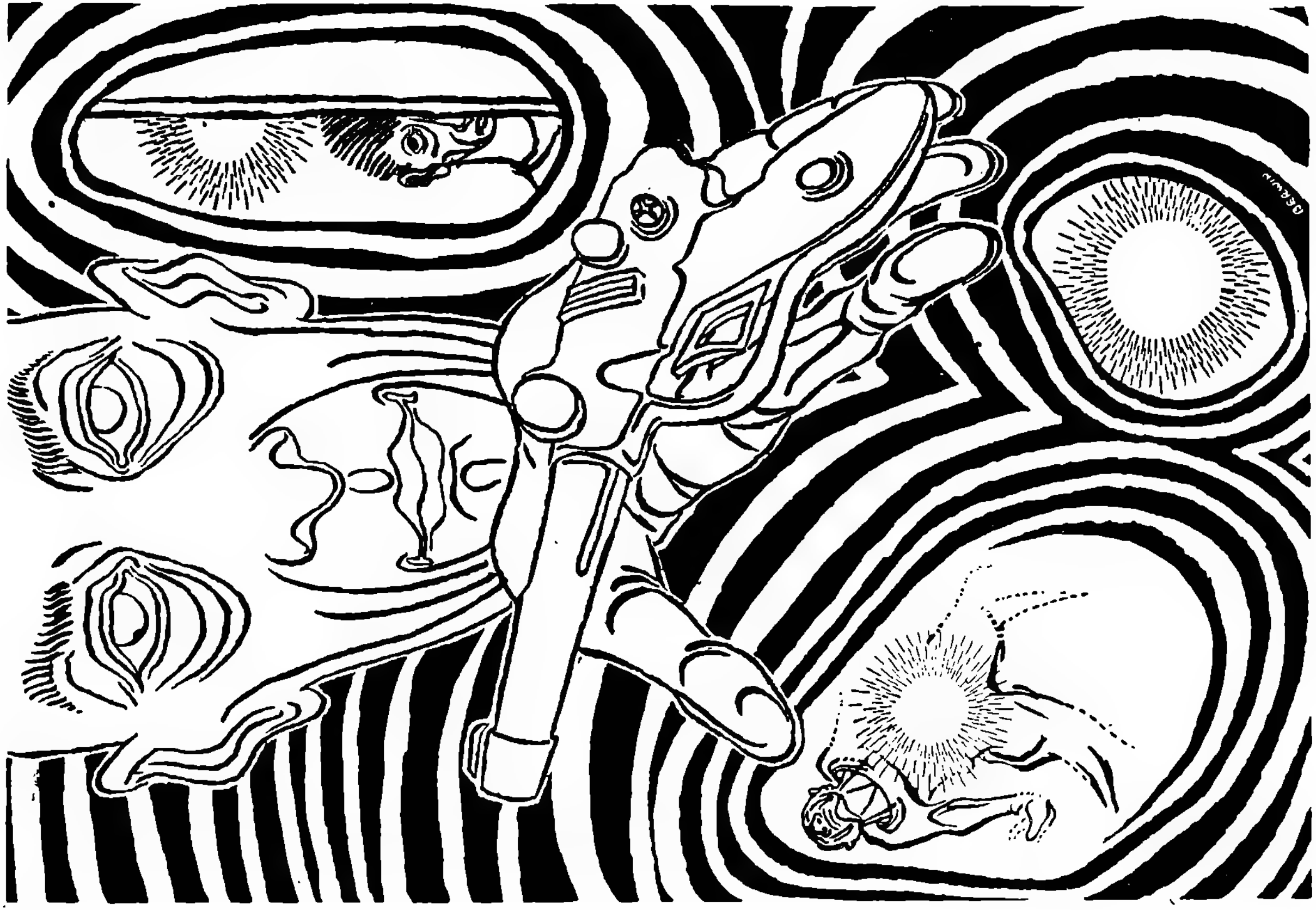
They met halfway up the alley by the garage where Bill and Hawk-nose had stood.

"Any sign?" asked a tall, iron-faced man with a shock of stiff white hair.

"Not a trace," a patrolman said.

"Washington's going to blow their stacks. See any kids?"

"They're checking the streets now," the patrolman said. He stuffed away his gun. "If either of them's within two miles of here, Mr. Jennifer, we'll pick them up. We can't miss."



"He was here," the white-haired man said testily. "A neighbor phoned him in." He pointed toward a white house standing back of the alley. "She saw him pass another pistol to a kid."

The patrolman's face whitened a little.

"Fifty thousand of the toy red pistols in the city," Jennifer said softly. "And we're going to have to run down every one of them. This is the fifth pistol he's passed. He'll make a break for it now. We'll have to close the airways."

He grimaced. The long lines of his face tightened. "Let's get moving. See if you can locate the kid while I call headquarters."

They trotted back toward the jet, their faces tense and excited. When they passed the white garage, neither of them stopped to look at the neat oval hole, eight inches wide, punched through the bottom of the garage door.

"What do you have there, Bill?" Henderson asked. He was red-faced, stocky, with heavy creases paralleling his nose, and he stood grinning before the Henderson Naborhood Drug Store.

"Nothing," said Bill.

"Why that's a handsome pistol, Bill. You buy it from me?"

"No," said Bill uneasily. He turned the pistol over and over in his hands, twisting the moveable cone at the muzzle.

"That's a fine gun there," Henderson said cheerfully. "Like the Space Rangers use. We sell lots of them. Does it work fine?"

Bill listened. When he heard no footsteps, he thawed slightly. "It works OK."

"Bpt-zfpt!" the pistol rasped, spraying blue-green flashes.

"Pretty," said Henderson, slapping a spark from his wrist. "Like fireworks."

"I gotta go," said Bill, edging around Henderson's bulk.

"Say hello to your Momma for me, Bill." He stood chuckling, watching Bill bolt down the street. Then he saw Bill's face twist back over his shoulder, and Henderson's chuckles stopped.

"What's wrong with that kid?"

Turning sharply, he moved into the silent drug store. "May," he called to his wife. "May, has Bill Caine been in here playing with . . ."

There was a long pause.

Then May stalked from the back room, her arms loaded with boxes of tooth-brightener spray. "What is it?" she called. "Did you want me?"

The drug store was still, empty under the hot beams of sunlight slanting in through the windows. She stood listening in

the center of the floor. Her mouth pursed thoughtfully. "Did you want me?"

Silence. She went to the open door, closed it to keep out flies. Standing in the thick, dusty sunlight, she called out her husband's name again, more loudly. He did not answer. When she closed the store at seven o'clock, he still had not answered, and by that time a thin wave of terror was washing under the angular lines of her dress.

"They found one of our cruiser-jets," the Commissioner said thoughtfully, bending over a map of the city. "It was empty —abandoned, they thought."

Jennifer scowled. "When did the car call in last?"

"Not since three o'clock. They found it at four-thirty." The Commissioner sighed, thrust out his lip. "No trace of the men, of course."

"There never is," the white-haired man said flatly. "Was there dust on the seat?"

"Lab is analyzing it now. You already know what they'll find. But we want to be sure. We have to be sure."

"Iron, iodine, mineral ash. Two men gone, but we got mineral ash to look at." His fingers worried in the blanched hair. "That's fine. That gives us a lot of information to go on."

"It's all a question of time, Jennifer. All a question of time."

Jennifer said viciously: "Time, hell. Fifty-three disappearances last week. We found two of the guns. Two out of maybe five, maybe fifty."

"We'll find him," the Commissioner said easily, his hands sliding one over the other. "It'll take time. But we'll get him."

"We'll get him after every kid in the States gets a disintegrator to play with," Jennifer snorted. "What's Washington have to say. Where's he from?"

"No one seems to know. Venus, maybe."

"Venus! There's nothing on Venus but blowpipes. And those damned Tzal-tubes." He stood up, jerking at his coat. "We're checking door to door in all the neighborhoods a disappearance has been reported. I'll see you later."

The Commissioner's eyes narrowed. "You aren't telling anyone why we want those pistols collected?"

Jennifer grinned. "On tri-vision they're saying that the sparks are poisonous. That's good enough. We've been getting bales of pistols. Which is pretty nice, seeing that you can't tell the toy from the real thing, and it takes three minutes for the disintegration to start after the beam's connected."

After he had gone out, slamming the door, the Commissioner stood quite still, picking at his lip. He stared down at the map and his mouth twisted. "An invasion," he said. "What a rotten dirty way to start an invasion."

Even on a tri-vision screen, the Governor looked hearty. Mouth slanted in that strangely warm smile, thick eyebrows raised confidently, he leaned back in his swivel chair facing the cameras. One hand lifted slightly in the old familiar gesture they expected.

"Dear friends," he began. "I have chosen to appear before you tonight to bring a grave warning . . ."

Then he vanished.

Under the blazing lights mounted about the room, he fell apart. His constituent elements, in a shining haze of dust, filtered down over the swivel chair, down across the desk in a swirling stream that twinkled in 100,000 tri-visual screens across the state.

The Governor's little boy screamed when they took the red pistol from him. He would only say that he had found it under the bushes, after which he had hysterics.

By that time, the newstapes had got the story, and the secret was a secret no longer.

When the police jet pulled up outside, Bill felt himself go loose with fright. All day they had been collecting the red pistols up and down the street, taking them impersonally, gingerly, and with no thanks. No one knew what would happen to the kids who owned them.

From the safety of his bedroom, he heard the patrolman knock at the door, speak briefly to his mother.

She was calling him. He cowered down in the chair by the front window, shaking, trying to think.

"Bill."

"Yes?" he answered weakly.

"Will you come down a minute?"

His heart shuddered. He had concealed the pistol under the cushions of the chair. Now he took it out, stood holding it at his side, hearing the vicious beat of Hawk-nose's voice inside him.

"I'll take it away if you tell. I'll come back and kill you."

His stomach felt like cold jelly. In a blind panic, he thrust the gun under the bed, pulled it back out, hid it under the pillow. When he had smoothed over the covers, his throat was throbbing hotly.

"Bill!"

"I'm coming." He dragged down the stairs into the living room. The patrolman stared at

him, his face heavy with suspicion.

She asked: "Bill, do you have any red pistols? Rocket pistols in the house?"

"No m'am."

"I thought you had one yesterday."

"It was Teddy's. I borrowed it from Teddy."

"I haven't bought one for him," she explained. "There's enough about rocket ships and space flights on the tri-viewer now. You know how . . ."

The patrolman was hot and out of temper. In sixty houses, sixty mothers had told him roughly the same thing. He snapped: "You have one of those guns, sonny?"

"No, sir."

"Did you give back the one you borrowed?"

"Yes, sir. It's right next door." They had picked Teddy's gun up half an hour ago; he had seen them do that. "I gave it right back."

"Come on, sonny," the patrolman growled. "Did a tall man give you a red toy pistol?"

"No, sir. It was Teddy's. You can ask him." Tears began to burn the rims of his eyes. Unmoving, he stood staring at the blue pattern of the rug, hoping they would go away, hoping that they would begin to talk, forgetting all about him.

His mother was asking: "Bill, what's wrong?"

"N-nothing."

The patrolman was by him, large and completely terrible in blue. "Where did you put it, sonny?"

"Now, officer, I'm sure . . ."

"I don't have it," Bill cried. And the tears burst free, blinding him. "Nobody gave me anything. I don't have it."

His mother gathered him to her. She said: "Please, if you'll come back later."

"I'm sorry. I have kids myself. I know what you're thinking. But if he has one of those pistols, it's dangerous; and the kids just won't talk to you about them."

Bill's shoulders shook steadily and against his will. Clutching his mother's arm, he heard the fragments of their speech about him. But louder, more ringing than their words was the ghost-voice of Hawk-nose. It paralyzed him.

The policeman's voice was sober. "Sorry, Mrs. Caine. They're dangerous. Thousands of them been given to kids. We have collected everyone we can find. You know about the Governor . . ."

"Bill," she said nervously. "You'd better go upstairs for a little while. Go on!"

He broke away. Their voices went on behind him as he sprinted up the stairs. Dry sobs broke in his throat as he stumbled into the tear-blurred room, groped under the pillow for the gun.

It was still there. Hard and light, the color of super-heated iron, a slim graceful weapon with gleaming sides. He began darting about the room seeking shelter for it.

The front door slammed.

From the window he saw the patrolman walking slowly down the steps, a large notebook in his hands, turning the pages and wetting a broad thumb on his tongue.

The world seemed intensely bright and the fear in Bill's body lifted quivering and raw. "I won't tell," he cried silently. "You can't have it. It's mine."

Bpt-zfpt!

"You can't have it. It's mine. It was given to me. If he comes back he'll . . ."

Bpt-zfpt!

The patrolman climbed into the jet, slammed the door, and the white cruiser glided away from the curb. Bill watched it turn the far corner. Then it jerked to a sudden stop. He saw the driver leap from the machine, staring back at the seat, his arms moving about, his body bending strangely, leaning back inside past the steering wheel.

From the stairs came the soft fall of his mother's steps. In one quick moment, he left the window, dropping the pistol behind a stack of tapes for his comic projector, and plunged face forward upon the bed.

The door clicked open, and the fresh sweet odor of his mother entered the room. When she knelt by his bed, he began to cry helplessly and without the ability to stop.

The autojet had come apart all over the street. It had fallen into two pieces, and the pieces had rolled, one into an Automatic Tailor's shop, the other into the signal barrier at the crosswalk.

As the Commissioner picked his way over shards of plastic glittering in the street, he felt a little sick. The disintegrator had sliced diagonally through the top of the machine, down through the shoulders of the driver and the legs of the couple in the rear seat. The beam had fanned out across the street, exhausting its strength by gouging out a wide rectangle in the side of the Milstrom Bank. The hole in the gray wall was large enough to drive a cruiser through.

Eyes a perfectly flat blue, he shoved through the crowd. The patrolmen saw him coming, broke a hole through the mob, and he squirmed out, came over to the mess.

"Did you get the gun?" he asked.

The patrolman nodded. "Another kid. He was waiting for the signal barrier to go up and just—well—started to wave this gun around."

"Didn't anybody stop him?"

"He's just a little kid," the patrolman said, wiping the back of his neck. "Just a little thing. I doubt if anybody saw him." He paused, stumbling over his words. "They won't do anything to him, will they, Commissioner?"

The Commissioner shook his head very slowly, as if it were a great weight. "Nobody'll do anything to him," he said. "He'll do it all to himself. Later. When he grows up and remembers. How many dead?"

"There was a pretty big crowd in front of the bank," the patrolman said hesitantly.

"How many do you estimate?"

"About twenty. Thirty."

The Commissioner's mouth grew small. "All right," he said at last. They were pulling something free from under the wreckage across the street, and he allowed himself to look too long. His mouth filled with a sticky heat. "All right," he repeated harshly. "Let's try and get this mess cleaned up."

A clear staccato humming spilled from the open door of the cruiser jet on the corner.

"I'll get it," the Commissioner said, and went over to flip down the button on the intercom. "Commissioner speaking," he said.

The intercom answered in precise rapid tones, all the humanity clipped out. The passenger liner from Chicago had been cut down over Haines Field. In several pieces. The Commissioner's attention seemed to slip off; he could hardly understand what was being said.

They had not located the gun. They had not discovered how many dead. The crash area was loused up with radiation, and they were having a full scale riot at the field. If the Commissioner was free, could he . . .

"I'll be right out," he answered. "Haines Field. In twenty minutes." Clicking off the intercom, he climbed stiffly into the street. The side of his mouth worked. He walked toward the patrolmen, wiping his hands carefully, carefully with a gray handkerchief. "They shouldn't have done this," he said. "Not with kids. It isn't right to use kids." In the fading light, he stumbled on a plastic fragment from somebody's windshield.

But he did not notice that.

The lab technician scowled and laid the pistol on the edge of his work bench. "It's a fine weapon," he said. "A wonderful fine piece of machinery, Mr. Jennifer."

Jennifer asked: "Can you strip it down without setting something off?"

The lab man shrugged. He tapped the pistol carelessly, his long face without expression. "Who knows? I'll try it and see."

"You may not have time to see," Jennifer said, taking out a pipe. Grains of tobacco fell on the table by the scarlet butt. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"The Commissioner wants to find out what's in it," the lab man said. "We already know what it can do."

"I haven't seen the report."

The blank face lighted a bit. "That cone there on the muzzle expands or contracts the---the beam, I guess you'd call it. Full open, the weapon has an effective range of about fifty feet—and fifteen feet up, down, and sideways. Closed down, it'll go about a hundred yards. Makes a hole two feet across. It spreads like the beam of a flashlight."

"Close combat weapon," Jennifer grunted. "Well, you want to make a crack at it?"

"Sure," the lab man said, picking up the pistol. "Maybe they'll pay me double time."

"I'd like to watch," Jennifer said.

"You better watch through the scanner."

"I'll stay," Jennifer said, holding his voice flat.

"Go on, sir. Move out." The lab man's lip pulled back gently against his teeth. "You're a good man. I'd hate to see a good man all bruised up if something slips."

Their eyes touched, held for a long time. Then Jennifer made a thin noise back in his throat, something like a sigh, shook the lab man's hand, and walked out down the hall to the scanner.

Three minutes later, the laboratory no longer existed.

The creamy voice belonged to a tri-vision commentator whose face had known no deeper emotion than thirst. He said sternly: "At seven o'clock tonight, panic grips the entire city. As yet the police dragnet has not uncovered the source of the pistols which have thrown the entire state into terror. Object of the most intensive man-hunt of modern times, the individual distributing the weapons to small children has successfully evaded all attempts at capture, and has evaded even the tight cordon thrown about the city by the city and state police and members of the National Guard. The Air Force and Inter-Strato Units are reported at the alert. Still officials reported repeated failures to cope with this—the most tragic attack to date on the citadel of freedom. While roads are blocked, air traffic halted, families are still terrorized to the point . . ."

He spoke until ten-thirty. By that time . . .

Six men had vanished at the Hindman Airbase, and Hawknose threw the jet screaming out across the runway. At 3,000 feet he leveled off with the airspeed indicator trembling at 950 mph. The cockpit was small and very hot, and greasy beads of perspiration hung under his eyes. In the darkness below him, lights flashed by in dots and patches. It had been very close, he thought; too close, with police yowling after him throughout the city, and every road closed. Guards at half the airports.

He grunted impatiently, and slipped the throttle forward. Time to rest now. Let someone else carry out the distribution for awhile. Basically the idea was good—to saturate the country with pistols and, when morale was stretched taut, to break it with a single decisive smash from space.

Not that the decisive smash was ripe yet. He brushed his face

with an unsteady hand. A big green planet ready for the taking. Although they had reacted fast, played fast against him. No, the pistol idea was about through. There were other plans —he'd recommend those in his report—but this one was . . .

The six jets settled about him. Out of the darkness they dropped, lean military craft, graceful and neatly murderous. Front and back, top and bottom, on each side. The shock of their presence slammed crushing between his eyes, and the jet wavered.

Instantly the formation tightened. His radio sputtered softly. And then the death sentence came, in the unyielding formula of the military.

"You are instructed to land immediately. Land immediately. Make no evasive action . . . Upon landing surrender yourself . . ."

There was more of the same, much more. It gave him the opportunity to open the black satchel that he had tossed on the double seat, and take out a pistol. The sleek red rocket pistol eagerly possessed by so many little boys.

While levering back the window, he felt the single gray hope that one or more of them would break formation. If he could knock out two . . .

"Close that window!" The words ripped from the radio. In the same instant, he threw back the glass, firing as the jet on his right flipped straight up, curving above him and to the left.

The wind impact was terrific through the open window. Cutting the throttle, he hurled the jet left and down. He saw that the formation had split apart and vanished in the darkness.

A single slim black shape was flitting across his top. He saw the dim white flare of the rear jet. Then the entire cockpit rammed into his face. A searing tear took his body apart. The cockpit filled with a heavy roaring that faded and went indistinct and, as the canopy collapsed screaming upon his back, driving his smashed face into the wreckage of the panel, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the west, the dim gray strip stretched from horizon to horizon marking where the sun had fallen.

He hurled forward out of himself in a singing thickening mist. The last thing he heard, before the mist closed out all light, was the crackling of the right wing as it folded tightly about the body of the jet.

He fell a long way alone down through the darkness.

They had searched his room and gone and now the white-haired man with the carefully

smiling face sat on the bed and talked to him.

"You don't have to worry about him any more, Bill. He was killed last night."

Bill sat quite still on the edge of the bed, a ball of cold trapped in his chest. He held the ball of cold closely, taking elaborate pains that White-Hair should never know it was there.

He said: "I don't have anything."

"We didn't find anything," Jennifer said slowly. "You don't have to be afraid now, Bill. It's all over. But if you happen to know any of your—" he hesitated, feeling out the words carefully "—any of your little friends who have one, ask them to send it to the police. The pistols are very dangerous, you see."

"Sure," said Bill, sitting alone in the encompassing cold.

"Well, take care of yourself, fellow."

"Yes, sir."

Jennifer rose heavily, glanced once again about the room, and at the ten-year-old sitting hunched together on the cool white bed. He sighed. "So long," he said.

Mrs. Caine met him at the door. "Is it all right?"

He nodded gently, took her out into the hall to whisper.

But all they could whisper and all they could do, did not touch the cold. He had heard what happened when people died. How they watched you by night; then, with their hands reaching wet up from under the bed, reaching out of the darkness to seize your foot or to touch your face. Still, that was only talk. What mattered now was that they might still find the pistol and take it from him.

He wanted it desperately. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and, while they could take away everything else, the pistol was his, given to him by a man who would not come back any more.

He looked at the heaped toybox in the corner.

Who would not come back any more, except at night. But night passed, and the pistol would always be there, in the toybox, covered with black varnish, a toy among toys. It was his personal beauty, more lovely now than when colored red. More like a proton pistol of the space guards —beautiful and long and slender and his.

The whispering continued behind the door. He closed his ears to it, stretched impatiently back across the bed, waiting till they would go downstairs. And his fingers could close around the smooth and shining grip. Until

the blue-green sparks could flare sizzling from the muzzle.

Breathing quietly, he lay listening to their voices.

Jennifer smoked a cigar. "One of the pistols is still missing," he said. "But we think we know the kid who's got it. We'll watch him till he gets it from wherever it's hid and then confiscate it. That cleans up this city. Lord knows how many more of those red devils are loose in the state."

The Commissioner nodded and raised his heavy eyebrows. "We will worry about the city first. So you had to shoot him down?"

"He took a shot at one of the army boys. Got about six inches of wing tip." He relighted the cigar and tapped it against the Commissioner's bronze ashtray. "Washington giving any leads on where this fellow was from?"

"None. Apparently he's been all over the country handing them out."

"I'd like to know from where," Jennifer said. And crushed out the cigar. He sat staring at the dying coil of blue smoke. "The lab's still checking the ones we've found. But if they were made here, or on Venus, you can have my resignation. Have you seen how those things are made?"

The Commissioner, rustling among his papers, grunted. "Don't worry about it. Everything's over here for awhile. Lay off a couple of days. I'm sending in a commendation for your work."

Jennifer shrugged and stood up. "Thanks, I suppose. If you ever get a line on who he was, wish you'd let me know."

"Glad to," the Commissioner said, and waited patiently for twenty minutes after Jennifer had gone. Locking his office then, he took a steel filing case from his wall safe. He placed the case on the glass top of his desk. He threw back the lid, and depressed the single red button on the black rectangle of metal in the box.

"Go ahead," a voice said from the box.

"Liox was killed last night. Over Springfield. All pistols in his possession were destroyed. There are four pistols at Headquarters Lab. Jennifer seems to believe that Liox was from out of Sol's system."

The box clicked sardonically. "Does he really? We'll see to the confiscated pistols. Notify us if Jennifer is likely to make trouble."

"Is there anything else?" the Commissioner asked, passing one wet hand across his face.

"Until Young can contact you, proceed with the distribution of Kit 324. Keep eight circulating through the city."

"All right," the Commissioner said thickly. He sat down hard, staring at the black box. "All right."

"For the invasion," the voice said.

"For the invasion," the Commissioner said.

The red button popped up in its socket.

Moving slowly, as if he were an aged man, the Commissioner locked the box away and stood loose-faced, staring at the map of the city. "For the invasion," he said dutifully in clean remote tones.

He spat into the wastebasket. He washed his hands at the sink. When he looked into the mirror over the wash-stand, the expression on his face sickened him. It was like staring at a cancer eating out his body.

His stomach quivered and he turned away. From the rear of his desk, he removed a cardboard box, wrapped in newstapes. The toys lay inside this.

Gleaming toys. Sparkling toys. Kit 324. Look through the long tube, just so. Pull the shining little slide, just so. All the vivid colors of the lens slip together, blue and scarlet and silver. Look at a tree, and slip the colors together. The tree becomes a magical thing. Covered with colors, blending and gliding together. A thing of beauty, lovely beyond words.

Take the tube away from the eyes and the tree isn't there, of course. But for awhile, it was beautiful.

Children would never tire of playing with such a toy.

He slammed the tube down on the desk. "Children," he snarled. "We didn't have to begin with children."

But there was no help for it. Wrapping the package, he stuck it in his pocket and left the office. He walked across town, twenty blocks or so, and children were all around him.

Yet he could not force himself to stop and speak to them.

Toys are one of the major industries today. There was a time when children had few toys, and appreciated those they had for years. Now they have many, and tire of them in hours. But whether that is progress or not, it's obvious that a growing technology produces a growing market for toys. Science is wonderful. Junior used to have to build his own—now Father has a hard time supplying enough for him to tear apart!

POLICE YOUR PLANET

BY ERIK VAN LHIN

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

When they deported Gordon to the corrupt frontier of Mars, he didn't have sense enough to starve quietly. He had to join the local police force just when elections were due.

(Second of Three Parts)

ORBAN

SYNOPSIS: BRUCE GORDON, *ex-boxer, ex-gambler, ex-cop, and now ex-reporter has been deported to Mars on a one-way ticket by the office of Solar Security for reporting secret information on the hell-world of Mercury. His only chance to return to Earth is to act as a spy for Solar Security.*

He intends to return on his own, by making enough to get illegal passage back. He stops outside the dome that protects the main part of Marsport, at the notorious old crooks' retreat of MOTHER COREY, *an ugly, fat old man. With Corey's help, he starts his winnings using marked cards, then moves on to one of the gambling joints where he knows how the wheel is fixed. But Fats Eller and his bouncer nearly get back his winnings. He escapes, and heads out of the dome toward Mother Corey's.*

In the wild slums out there, he is attacked by SHEILA COREY *and her gang.* HONEST IZZY *has fingered him for them, but then sells his services to Gordon, and fights at his side. They are beaten. But Sheila stops to repair his damaged air-suit, and he overcomes her, gets back her share of his money. He learns she is the granddaughter of Mother Corey, who came as a romantic kid looking for her grandfather, and was sold by him to a local gang leader. She finally killed the gangster, and is now running wild.*

Izzy and Gordon use their money to join the police force, where the graft is best, since there isn't enough to go back to Earth. Mother Corey also moves into the dome to be respectable. But Gordon finds the administration is up for re-election, and greedy for money to hire hoodlums to support it. The graft as cop is good, but the "Voluntary Donations" take most of it. When he refuses to kick in, he is kept on duty 24 hours at a time, until he contributes.

Gordon is transferred to the outskirts, where CAPTAIN WHALER *has been imported from Earth to clean up the Stonewall gang. The administration of* MAYOR WAYNE *opposes him, but has to make a token show of co-operation with him. Whaler uses wooden clubs and a totally ruthless drive to break up the gang. In two weeks, they are practically driven out. Gordon finds he enjoys this, even though there is no graft involved.*

He is doing fine until he hears of a new gang opening up there. He goes searching, and is caught empty-handed by Sheila, who has one of the guns which is illegal on Mars, due to danger to the dome. She is determined to get even with him for humiliating her before. She orders him to

strip off his helmet—which will mean death in the thin air.

Gordon tries taunting her into uncontrolled rage, but she simply becomes more determined. Finally, he removes his helmet and throws it at her, just before he blanks out from lack of air.

V

His nose had been bleeding from the change in pressure, and there was a taste of blood in his mouth. Gordon licked his lips, and opened his eyes slowly, while the fuzziness gradually moved out of his mind. He was lying on his back, staring at a grimy ceiling, and the air had a musty quality. By turning his eyes, he could see that he was in a small, dimly-lighted room, and that the hasty work of making it air-tight had changed none of the ravages of time; the rottenness had simply been covered up with patches of permaseal plastic, glued down to hold in the air.

The girl was squatting on her heels beside him, and the gun was in one of her hands, a knife in the other. Her face was sullen now. But it firmed up as she saw that his eyes were open, and the knife twisted, pointing toward him. She opened her mouth, but he beat her to it.

"So you're still soft underneath it all?" he challenged her. The words were thick on his tongue, and his head had a thousand devils beating tom-toms inside it, but he ignored them ruthlessly. "Just because I don't cry and whimper, you can't let me die. You had to lug me inside here to find out why, eh?"

Her face had frozen at the sound of his voice, but she seemed to pay no attention to his words. "Why'd you laugh? Damn you, Gordon, why did you laugh when you threw that helmet?"

"Because I knew you'd have to find out why," he told her. The surprising thing about it was that he suddenly realized it had been true. He'd operated on a last-second hunch, and it had paid off. "I knew you couldn't let me die without finding out why I didn't do what you expected. You're still soft, Cuddles!"

"Damn you! I'll show you . . ." The knife whipped back in an overhand that no skilled fighter would use, and then dropped as he managed to grin at her. "The name's Sheila—Sheila Corey, and no cracks about that!"

She stood up and began pacing, keeping her eyes on him. She swung back to face him as he shoved himself into sitting position. "You look like a human being. You bleed like one. But inside, you're a rotten, stinking machine!"

He grimaced at that. He'd

been told it before. Compensation, he'd been told by the psychiatrist in the Security office; a fear of being hurt that had begun in the slums as a kid and frozen him, until he thought he couldn't be hurt. He'd walled in the softness he should have had, until it couldn't be reached. He'd hidden his own feelings, and learned to disregard those of others. And the professions he'd chosen—fighter, gambler, cop, reporter—had proved it.

"You're just the sort that grandfather of mine *would* admire!" she finished hotly.

He laughed again, then, and her actions slipped into a slot he could understand. Before, she had been a random factor. There'd been no reason why she should pick him out as her target. But he could remember her passing them that first day, with Mother Corey so enraptured at the sight of the new deck of reader cards that had reminded him of his own beginnings. To an outsider, it probably would have looked as if Mother Corey had been taking the newcomer to his enormous bosom.

"And he doesn't admire you, eh?" Gordon guessed. "He laughed at your romantic nonsense, didn't he? He sent you out to toughen up—and *that* must have been an experience! Too bad your—ah—husband couldn't control . . ."

A shrill whisper of a scream came from her lips, barely giving him warning as she charged. The gun dropped from her fingers, and the knife lifted. She leaped for him, her knees striking the floor where his stomach had been, and her clawed hand groping for his throat. The knife went all the way back and began to come forward.

He got one hand up to her wrist, barely in time. The inertia of the blow carried the point of the knife to the fabric of his suit. He forced it back, while his other hand jerked her fingers away from his neck. Then she was a screaming, clawing madwoman, her lips snarled back to expose her teeth, while her sharp canines snapped at his throat, slashed his wrist, and drove forward again and again. Her fingers were raking at his face, tearing at his hair. And her whole body was a writhing knot of fury, as she tried to swarm over him, beating at him with her knees and feet. She seemed to have at least a score of wild limbs, and the governor on her internal motor had long since cut out.

His knowledge of the ring was useless—as useless as the dirty fighting he'd learned elsewhere. His mind snapped all the way

back to his slum childhood, and his body reacted as it had done when the neighborhood tomboys had ganged up on him. He drove a sharp elbow against her breasts, slapped the edge of his hand against the small of her back, and then grabbed for her legs and twisted. Her furious snarling changed to a gasp, but before she could catch herself, he'd rolled out from under her. He brought a knee up against the place where sensitive glands lay between abdomen and leg. His hands caught her arms, and he forced them back by sheer superiority of muscle, while his other knee found the second tender spot. He let his weight rest there, changing his hold on her wrists from two hands to one, and jerked her head back with the other.

He thumped the back of her head against the hard floor, and her agonized groans cut off. For a scant second, she was out. He found the zipper on her Mars suit, jerked it down, and caught the shoulders of the suit in his hands, bringing it down over her arms and pinioning them at the elbows.

Briefly, then, he hesitated. Her thin blouse had snapped partly open, exposing the upper part of her chest. On it were lines and small scars, telling their own story of a captivity where the thug had clawed and mauled her into temporary submission. No wonder she'd killed the devil! And the soiled edges of her underclothing told their own story of a girl who must have been neat once, but who was now forced to live where even a change of clothing was too great a luxury, and where water was available only for drinking.

He reached forward to straighten her blouse. She jerked to an abrupt steely stiffness, and gray horror hit her face, while her eyes threatened to leap out of their sockets.

"*No!*" It tore out of her lips like a board being ripped from a sawmill.

There was a sickness in him—the same sickness he'd felt when his first and only girl-friend had been found killed at the hands of a maniac the patrol board had decided was cured. He stood up, shaking his head, and located the knife and the gun.

"Button your blouse, Sheila," he told her. "And the next time, don't let a man goad you into going crazy. All I wanted was your weapons—and I've got them."

There was a total lack of comprehension in her eyes as she sat up and reached for the buttons. He studied her, unsure of what to do next. Then, as she

reached for the zipper on her suit, he shook his head.

"Take it off," he told her sharply. Without a suit, she'd have to stay inside the hovel here until he could make up his mind, at least.

Her face blanched, but she reached for the zipper, and began unfastening it. Her hands shook, but she drew it down, and started to shrug her way out of the suit.

He stopped her, and again there was the sickness inside him. The few pitiful rags inside the suit were totally incapable of covering her decently. It was a hell of a life for a woman—any kind of woman. He wondered abruptly how many others he saw going about in their suits were in the same desperate fix—and how many had sat futilely trying to patch what they had while the police and the gangs came regularly for their graft.

He reached for the zipper himself, and drew it up. "Forget it. I guess your helmet's all I need."

Then she broke. Her legs seemed to buckle slowly under her, until she was sitting on the floor. Her hands dropped to her sides, and her head slumped forward. She made no sound, but her shoulders shook, and tears began to drop slowly to the dirty floor, leaving muddy splotches where they fell.

Gordon found his helmet and put it back on, cutting out the musty smell of the place. He picked up her smaller plastic bowl and strapped it to his belt. Then he swung to look at her.

The tears were gone now, and she was on her feet, staring at him. "You damned human machine!" she said, and her voice was flat and harsh. "I should have known. You wouldn't even know what to do with a woman if she didn't care. You're not even human enough for *that!* You—you *robot!*"

It hurt, inside him. But he sealed off the hurt of it almost at once. His lips twisted bitterly. "Your gratitude's appreciated, Cuddles. But I like my women feminine—and clean!"

Her hand hit the side of his helmet with a sharp splat. The red spots on her cheeks spread outwards to cover her face as she realized the stupidity of the gesture. Then she shrugged. "Go on, then, kill me and get it over with. You might as well."

"I'll leave the killing to you," he answered her. "You'll be all right here, until I can send someone to take you off in the paddy wagon." He threw back the helmet, sniffing the air again, but there was enough oxygen in it for several hours for her. Yet there was genuine fear in her eyes. He puzzled over it for a

second, before her glance at the knife he held triggered his mind.

In a way, she was probably right. He could imagine the type of gutter-sweepings she must have recruited in her desperate attempt to set up a gang out here. If one of them came back and found her without a weapon . . .

He broke the gun and removed the bullets from it, dropping them into a pocket of his suit. For a second, he hesitated. Maybe he should take her with him. But that would mean turning her over to Captain Whaler, who'd see no difference between the men of the Stonewall gang and a woman trying to set up another gang. Maybe there was no difference, but he still owed her a vague kind of obligation because of her silly attempt to save his life the other time—and he preferred to fight his own battles. This came under the heading of a personal feud. Anyhow, even if her men came back, they'd have no helmet to fit her. She'd keep, until he could come back—and a little waiting and worry would be good for her.

He tossed her the gun, and started to go out through the dilapidated entrance port. Then he grinned, and turned back.

"They'll be as scared of it without bullets as with, if they don't know," he told her. "But this time, if I let you keep it, I want to see some gratitude. Come here! And if you bite, I'll knock your head off!"

Surprisingly, after a single instant of fury, she came quietly enough, even lifting her head toward him. He dragged her shoulders around, and pulled her to him, bending down to lips that neither resisted nor responded. Then he felt the beginnings of a response, and his hand dropped sharply to his knife, pressing it down into its sheath before she could reach it.

He drew his head up, and the grin came back to his lips. "Naughty, naughty," he told her.

She stamped her foot against the floor and jerked her head away. "Damn you! You stinking . . ."

But her head came up again, and her eyes met his. She fought back for a second as he pulled her to him. This time, there was life and fire in her lips, and even through the suit he could feel her sway towards him.

He straightened, snapped down the helmet, and was heading out through the entrance without a backwards look. It was night outside, and the phosphor bulbs at the corners were glowing dimly, giving him barely enough light by which to locate

the way back to the extemporized precinct house. He shook the fuzz out of his head, grimacing at his own reactions. Well, the vixen had needed taming.

He reached the outskirts of the miserable business section, noticing that a couple of the shops were still open. It had probably been years since one had dared risk it after the sun went down. And the slow, doubtful respect on the faces of the citizens as they nodded to him was even more proof that Whaler's system was working, however drastic it might be. Gordon nodded to a couple, and they grinned faintly at him. Damn it, Mars could be cleaned up . . .

He grinned at himself. Maybe Mother Corey was right; put a cop's uniform on him, and he started thinking like a cop. All this was fine, but it didn't help him get back to Earth. Even at double pay, he still wasn't getting anywhere. The best place for him was still back under the central dome, where the pickings were good.

Then something needled at his mind, until he swung back. The man was carrying a lunch basket, and wearing the coveralls of one of the crop prospector crews, but the expression on his face had been wrong. Gordon had noticed it from the corner of his eye, and now he saw the sullen scowl slip from the man's face abruptly and turn into a mixture of hate and fear.

Red hair, too heavily built, a lighter section where a mustache had been shaved and the skin not quite perfectly powdered . . . Gordon moved forward quickly, until he could make out the thin scar showing through the make-up over the man's eyes. He'd been right—it was O'Neill, head of the Stonewall gang, and the man they'd been trying hardest to find.

Gordon hit the signal switch, and the Marspeaker let out a shrill whistle. O'Neill had turned to run, and then seemed to think better of it. His hand darted down to his belt, just as Gordon reached him.

The heavy locust stick met the man's wrist before the weapon was half drawn—another gun! Guns, suddenly, seemed to be flourishing everywhere. It dropped from the hand as the wrist snapped, and O'Neill let out a high-pitched cry of pain. Then another cop came around a corner at a run.

"You can't do it to me! I'm reformed. I'm going straight! You damned cops can't . . ." O'Neill was blubbering. The small crowd that was collecting was all to the good, Gordon knew, and he let the man go on. Nothing could help break up the

gangs more than having a leader break down in public.

The other cop had yanked out O'Neill's wallet, and now tossed it to Gordon. One look was enough—the work papers had the tell-tale overthickening of the signature that had showed up on other papers, and they were obviously forgeries. The cops had been accepting the others on the hope of finding one of the leaders, and luck had been with them.

Some of the citizens turned away as Gordon and the other cop went to work, but most of them had old hatreds that left them no room for squeamishness. When it was over, the two picked up their whimpering captive. Gordon pocketed the revolver with his free hand. "Walk, O'Neill!" he ordered. "Your legs are still whole. Use them!"

The man staggered between them, whimpering as each step jolted his wrecked body. If any of the gang were around, they made no attempt to rescue him as he moved down the four blocks to the precinct house. This was probably the most respectable section of Marsport, at the moment.

Jenkins, the other cop, had been holding the wallet. Now he held it out towards Gordon. "The gee was heeled, Corporal. Must of been making a big contact in something. Fifty-fifty?"

"Turn it in to Whaler," Gordon said, and then cursed himself for being a fool. There must have been over two thousand credits in the wallet, a nice start toward his pile. He was hoping that Jenkins would argue him out of his unreasoned honesty, but the other merely shrugged and stuffed it back into O'Neill's belt-pocket. It didn't make sense, but the money was still there when they dumped the crook onto a bench before Whaler.

The Captain's face had been buried in a pile of papers, but now he came around to stare at the gang leader. He inspected the forged work papers, and jerked his thumb toward one of the hastily built cells, where a doctor would look O'Neill over —eventually. When Gordon and Jenkins came back, Whaler tossed the money to them. "Split it. You guys earned it by keeping your hands off it. Anyhow, you're as entitled to it as he was—or the grafters back at Police Headquarters. I never saw it . . . Gordon, you've got a visitor!"

His voice was bitter, but he made no opening for them to question him as he picked up the papers and began going through them again. Gordon went down the passage to the end of the hall, in the direction

Whaler had indicated. Waiting for him was the lean, cynical little figure of Honest Izzy, complete with uniform and sergeant's stripes.

"Hi, gov'nor," the little man greeted him. "Long time no see. With you out here and me busy nights doing a bit of convoy work on the side, we might as well not both live at Mother's."

Gordon nodded, grinning in spite of himself. "Convoy duty, Izzy? Or dope running?"

"Whatever comes to hand, gov'nor. The Force pays for my time during the day, and I figure my time's my own at night. Of course, if I ever catch myself doing anything shady during the day, I'll have to turn myself in. But it ain't likely." He grinned in satisfaction. "Now that I've dug up the scratch to buy these stripes and get made sergeant—and that takes the real crackle—I'm figuring on taking it easy."

"Like this social call?" Gordon asked him.

The little man shook his head, his ancient eighteen-year-old face turning sober. "Nope. I've been meaning to see you, so I volunteered to run out some red tape for your Captain. You owe me some bills, gov'nor. Eleven hundred fifty credits. You didn't pay up your pledge to the campaign fund, so I hadda fill in. A thousand, interest at ten percent a week, standard. Right?"

Gordon had heard of the friendly interest charged on the side here, but he shook his head. "Wrong, Izzy. If they want to collect that dratted pledge of theirs, let them put me where I can make it. There's no graft out here!"

"Huh?" Izzy turned it over, and shook his head. Finally he shrugged. "Don't matter, gov'nor. Nothing about that in the pledge, and when you sign something, you gotta pay it. You *gotta*."

"All right," Gordon admitted. He was suddenly in no mood to quibble with Izzy's personal code. "So you paid it. Now show me where I signed any agreement saying I'd pay you back!"

For a second, Izzy's face went blank. Then he chuckled, and the grin flashed back impishly. "Jet me! You're right, gov'nor. I sure asked for that one. Okay, I'm bloody well suckered. So forget it."

Gordon shrugged and gave up. He pulled out the bills and handed them over, noticing that he was left with less than a hundred credits. It seemed that nothing he did would increase his bankroll over that here. "Thanks, Izzy."

"Thanks, yourself." The kid pocketed the money cheerfully,

nodding. "Buy you a beer. Anyhow, you won't miss it. I came out to tell you I got the sweetest beat in Marsport—over a dozen gambling joints on it—and I need a right gee to work it with me. So you're it!"

For a moment, Gordon wondered what Izzy had done to earn that beat, but he could guess. The little guy knew Mars as few others did, apparently, from all sides. And if any of the other cops had private rackets of their own, Izzy was undoubtedly the man to find it out, and use the information. With a beat such as that, even going halves, and with all the graft to the upper brackets, he'd still be able to make his pile in a matter of months.

But he shook his head. "I'm assigned here, Izzy, at least for another week, until after elections . . ."

"Better take him up, Gordon," Whaler's voice told him bitterly. The Captain looked completely beaten as he came into the room and dropped onto the bench. "Go on, accept, damn it. You're not assigned here any more. None of us are. Mayor Wayne found an old clause in the charter and got a rigged decision, pulling me back under his full authority. I thought I had full responsibility to Earth, but he's got me. Wearing their uniform makes me a temporary citizen! So we're being smothered back into the Force, and they'll have their patsies out here, setting things up for the Stonewall boys to come back by election time. Grab while the grabbing's good, because by tomorrow morning I'll have this all closed down!"

He shook off Gordon's hand, and stood up roughly, to head back up the hallway. Then he stopped and looked back. "One thing, Gordon. I've still enough authority to make you a sergeant. It's been a pleasure working with you, Sergeant Gordon!"

He swung out of view abruptly, leaving Gordon with a heavy weight in his stomach. Izzy whistled, and began picking up his helmet, preparing to go outside. "So that's the dope I brought out, eh? Takes it kind of hard, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," Gordon answered. There was no use trying to explain it to Izzy. "Yeah, we do. Come on."

Outside, Gordon saw other cops moving from house to house, and he realized that Whaler must be sending out warnings to the citizens that things would be rough again. For a second, he started to go back to help, until he realized that he'd completely forgotten about freeing Sheila. That would have to be done first. "Come on," he said,

and headed toward the abandoned section, Izzy shrugged, but followed.

But there was no need to free her. A bullet within inches of his head told him that, when they were still three hundred feet from the old ruin.

He dropped to his face, cursing himself for not checking her clothing for more bullets. In the dim light, he could just see her, with some odd thing around her head. Apparently, she'd yanked the permaseal sheets off the wall and glued them into a substitute helmet. He should have thought of that, too.

"The Mother's babe?" Izzy asked.

He nodded, and reached for the gun he had taken from O'Neill, just as another shot sounded faintly in the thin air.

Izzy's hand darted back and appeared with a knife in it. "Easy, gov'nor! Don't try anything! She gave me a retainer for protection against you, and it's good till after elections!"

"She'll kill both of us!"

"Can't be helped," Izzy said flatly. "She's a bad shot. Never had much chance to practice—I hope!"

She apparently had only one reload for the gun, but two of the bullets were painfully close before she stopped firing. Then she abruptly turned and ran back into darkness. Izzy put the knife back, and got to his feet, holding out a hand to help Gordon. "Wheew! Let's get a beer, gov'nor—on me!"

It was as good an idea as any he had, Gordon decided. He might as well enjoy what life he still had while he could, on this stinking planet. The prospect for the future didn't look too rosy.

Sheila was loose and planning vengeance. The Stonewall gang—what was left of it—and all its friends would be gunning for him now. The Force wouldn't have been fooled when Izzy paid his pledge, and they'd mark him down as disloyal—if they didn't automatically mark down all who'd served under Whaler. He'd be a sergeant on a good beat until after elections. Then they'd get him. And if the reform ticket should win, he'd be out cold.

It was a lovely future. And meantime, he didn't have the ghost of an idea as to what Security wanted of him, or where they were hiding themselves.

"Make it two beers, Izzy," he said. "Needled!"

VI

In the few days at the short-lived Nineteenth Precinct, Gordon had begun to feel like a cop again, but the feeling disappeared as he reported in at Cap-

tain Isiah Trench's Seventh Precinct. Trench had once been a colonel in the Marines, before a court-martial and sundry unpleasantness had driven him off Earth. His dark, scowling face and lean body still bore a military air, and there was none of the usual false subtlety currently in fashion among his fellow captains.

He looked Gordon over sourly, and shook his head. "I've been reading your record, Gordon, and it stinks. Making trouble for Jurgens—could have been charged as false arrest. No cooperation with your captain until he forced it. Out in the sticks beating up helpless men. Now you come crawling back to your only friend Isaacs. Well, if he wants you, I'll give it a try. But step out of line, and I'll have you cleaning streets with your bare hands. All right, *Corporal* Gordon. Dismissed. Get to your beat."

Gordon grinned wryly at the emphasis on his title. No need to ask what had happened to Whaler's recommendation that he be made a sergeant. He joined Izzy in the locker room, summing up the situation.

"Yeah." Izzy looked worried, his thin face pinched in. "Maybe I didn't do you a favor, gov'nor, pulling you here. I dunno. I got some pics of Trench from a gee I know. That's how I got my beat so fast in the Seventh. But Trench ain't married, and I guess I've used up the touch. Maybe I could try it, though."

"Forget it," Gordon told him.

He had his private doubts. Trench would probably take out on him the resentment at Izzy's blackmailing. They moved out to the little car that would take them to their beat for the day in silence.

The beat was a gold-mine. It lay through the gambling section where Gordon had first tried his luck on Mars. There were a dozen or so gambling joints, half a dozen cheap saloons, and a fair number of places listed as rooming-houses, though they made no bones about the fact that all their permanent inhabitants were female. Since men outnumbered women here by six to one, it was a thriving business. Then the beat swung off the main stem, past a row of small businesses and cheap genuine rooming-houses, before turning back to the main section.

They began in the poorer section. It wasn't the day to collect the "tips" for good service that had once been an honest attempt to promote good police service, before it became a racket. But they were met everywhere by sullen faces, and Gordon noticed that two of the little shops had

apparently gone out of business in the last few days. Izzy explained it. The city had passed a new poll tax to pay for election booths, supposedly, and made the police collect it. Whaler must have disregarded the order, but the rest of the force had been busy helping the administration kill the egg-laying goose in its drive for election funds.

But once they hit the main stem, things were mere routine. The gambling joints took it for granted that beat-cops had to be paid, and considered it part of their operating expense. The only problem was that *Fats' Place* was the first one on the list. Gordon remembered the bouncer with the gun and ugly temper. He didn't expect to be too welcome there. But Izzy was heading across the street, and it might as well be faced now as later.

There was no sign of the thug, but Fats came out of his back office, just as Gordon reached the little bar. He came over, nodded, and picked up a cup and dice, to begin shaking them.

"High man for sixty," he said automatically, and expertly rolled bullseyes for a two. "Izzy said you'd be around. Sorry my man drew that *knife* on you the last time, Corporal."

Gordon rolled an eight and pocketed the bills. He suspected that more of the normal fatalism of a gambler lay behind Fats' acceptance than any fear he might report the illegal gun inside the dome. He shrugged. "Accidents will happen, Fats."

"Yeah." The other picked up the dice and began rolling sevens absently. "How come you're walking beat, anyhow? With what you pulled here, you should have bought a captaincy."

Gordon told him briefly. The man chuckled grimly. "Well, that's Mars," he said, and turned back to his private quarters.

Mostly, it was routine work. They came on a drunk later, collapsed in an alley, and pretty badly mauled. But the muggers had apparently given up before Izzy and Gordon arrived, since the man had his wallet clutched in his hand. Gordon reached for it, twisting his lips. Make hay while the sun shines, he thought bitterly.

Izzy stopped him, surprisingly. "It ain't honest, gov'nor. If the gees in the wagon clean him, or the desk man gets it, that's their business. But I'm bloody well going to run a straight beat, or else!"

That was followed by a call to remove a berserk spaceman from one of the so-called rooming houses. Gordon noticed that workmen were busy setting up a heavy wooden gate in front of the entrance to the place. There

were a lot of such preparations going on for the forthcoming elections.

Then the shift was over. But Gordon wasn't too surprised when his relief showed up two hours late. He'd half-expected some such nastiness from Trench. He sent a muttering Izzy back when the little man's relief came, and walked his beat grimly. But he was surprised at the look on his tardy relief's face.

The man seemed to avoid facing him, as if he had the plague. "Captain says report in person at once," the cop muttered, and swung out of the scooter and onto his beat without further words. Gordon shouted after him, then shrugged, and began steering the scooter back to the precinct house.

He was met there by blank faces and averted looks, but someone jerked a thumb toward Trench's office, and he went inside. Trench sat chewing on a cigar, and nodded curtly. His voice was hoarse. "Gordon, what does Security want with you?"

"Security?" It hit him like a sap, after the weeks of waiting without a sign. Some of it must have shown in his voice, because Trench looked up sharply from something on the desk. Gordon tried to cover, knowing it was probably too late. "Not a damned thing, if I can help it. They kicked me off Earth on a yellow ticket, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah." Trench wasn't convinced. He tossed a letter toward Gordon, bearing the "official business" seal of Solar Security. It was addressed to Corporal Bruce Gordon, Nineteenth Police Precinct, Marsport. Trench kept his eyes on it, his face filled with suspicion and the vague fear most men had for Security.

"Yeah," he said again. "Okay, probably routine. Only next time, Gordon, put the *facts* on your record with the Force. If you're a deportee, it should show up. That's all!"

Gordon went out, holding the envelope. The warning in Trench's voice wasn't for any omission on his record, he knew. He studied the seal on the envelope, and nodded. They'd been careful, but a close inspection showed it had been opened. He shoved it into his belt pocket and waited until he was in his own room before opening it.

It was terse, and unsigned. "Report expected, overdue. Failure to observe duty will result in permanent resettlement to Mercury."

He swore, coldly and methodically, while his stomach dug knots in itself. The damned, stupid, blundering fools! That was

all Trench and the police gang had to see. Sure, report at once. Drop a letter in the mailbox, and the next day it would be turned over to Commissioner Arliss' office. Any gang as well-settled as Wayne and Arliss would have ways and means of taking care of a spy for Security. Report or be kicked off to a planet that Security felt enough worse than Mars to use as punishment! Report *and* find Mars a worse place than Mercury could ever be. They'd fixed him up—it was almost as if they wanted him given the works. And for all he knew, that might be the case.

He felt sick as he stood up to find paper and pen and write a terse, factual account of his own personal doings—minus any hint of anything wrong with the system here. Security might think it was enough for the moment, and the local men might possibly decide it was all that was meant by Security—a mere required formality. At least it would stall things off for a while, he hoped.

But he knew now that he could never hope to get back to Earth legally. That vague promise by Security was so much hogwash, as he should have known all along. Yet it was surprising how much he had counted on it. Somewhere in the back of his head, he'd felt that even if he failed to get his stake to pay for smuggling him back, eventually Security might reprieve him. Now, while his chances looked slimmer with every passing day and every extra mark against him, the responsibility for leaving Mars was squarely on his own shoulders—with speed a lot more important than scruples.

He tore the envelope from Security into tiny shreds, too small for Mother Corey to make sense of, and went out to send the space cable, feeling the few bills in his pocket. Less than a hundred credits, after paying for the message—and it took thousands to pay for even a *legal* passage!

He passed a sound truck, blatting out a campaign speech by candidate Murphy, filled with too-obvious facts about the present administration, together with hints that Wayne had paid to have Murphy assassinated. Gordon saw a crowd around it and was surprised, until he recognized them as Rafters—men from the biggest of the gangs supporting Wayne. The few citizens on the street who drifted toward the truck took a good look at them and moved on hastily.

It seemed incredible that Wayne could be reelected, though, even with the power of the gangs. Murphy was probably a grafter, too, but he'd at least be a change, and certainly the

citizens were aching for that. If he won, of course, Gordon would be out on his ear. If he lost, however, it wouldn't help much; once the Wayne gang was back in solidly, they'd be prepared to take care of anyone whom they suspected. Yet there seemed nothing to do but play it straight for the few days left.

The next day his relief was later. Gordon waited, trying to swallow their petty punishments, but it went against the grain. Finally, he began making the rounds acting as his own night man. The owners of the joints didn't care whether they paid the second daily dole to the same man or another. But they wouldn't pay it again that same night. He'd managed to tap most of the places before his relief showed. He made no comment, but dutifully filled out the proper portion of both takes for the Voluntary Donation box. It wouldn't do his record any good with Trench, but it should put an end to the overtime.

Trench, however, had other ideas. He sent the relief out promptly, but left a message under the special emergency heading. Somehow, they'd overlooked sending one of the destitutes over to the Employment Bureau, and it was up to Gordon to take the trip.

Gordon knew a little about the system used to save the city any cost from keeping the hopelessly poor who gave up or the drug addicts who reached the end of their rope. In former days, it had been known as indentured slavery, but slavery was illegal here, so they called it employment procurement. And, as usual, when the honest word was avoided, the deed itself was worse.

He watched them bring out a pitifully slim girl with an old, sullen face and the body of a sixteen-year old. He signed the papers, snapped the cuffs about her wrist and his own, and got into the back of the wagon with her. The papers he carried told the story, roughly. Hilda's father had been killed "accidentally" when he refused to meet his racket protection payments. Her brother had joined one of the petty gangs and been killed in a feud. Her mother had kept food in the girl's mouth for two years in the only way an unskilled woman could earn money on Mars, until she was picked up and fined for having no permit. Then, in default of money to pay the fine, the city had sold her services for five years to the operator of a sweat-shop, where she'd probably have died of tuberculosis by now. The girl had run away to the slums beyond the dome, joined a gang,

and made out for a while. But things must have gone wrong, because the police had found her dying with run-down batteries for her aspirator.

Her sullen eyes were on him as he filled in from the glib expressions on the records. "I hope you're satisfied!" she said, finally.

"Why me?"

"Because it's all your fault. I was doin' all right. Sheila and me was like *that*—see? Just like that. Gave me her second slip, she did, when I didn't have none. And she was building her a good gang. Boy, did she keep them respectful, too! And to me, even! Then she come back one night an' they told her either she got them bigger jobs or she was out. So she got them one. You! You, see? Said she'd find a sucker, and we waited, and she highsigns us it was gonna be outside the dome, and safe. And we took you, too. 'N she sent us ahead . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and Gordon waited. Sheila Corey, it seemed, had to be mixed up in everything. The girl caught her breath, and her eyes were hot now. "When they went back, they found her all beaten up. Naturally, they didn't want a gang leader that'd let things like that happen. 'N they had a big fight, and they all quit her, except me. You just try not having a gang, Mr. Cop! I run away when I seen she din't have enough for even herself to eat. Now she's probably . . ."

"She's doing all right," Gordon told her. "At least she was a couple days ago. Well enough to buy a gun, pay a retainer against me, and start operating, at least."

The girl's eyes dropped then. She sighed, almost contentedly. "Gee, I'm glad. Sheila's a queen —a real queen . . . Mr. Cop, what they gonna do to me? I mean, it ain't gonna be . . ."

"Somebody'll probably want you to keep house and maybe marry in a couple years," Gordon answered. He knew that it could happen—but he doubted it. The papers had carried a note that the city was putting in a bid of five hundred credits for her five years of service. It was doubtful that anyone would offer more for her, or even bother to bid against the city-owned houses.

They had reached the barn-like Employment Bureau then, and he turned her over to one of the attendants. Bidding was almost done for the day, and only a few bidders remained, while the auctioneer was proceeding in an automatic sing-song. He finished on a blowsy, elderly woman who kept protesting that she was a

seamstress, she was. Then he signalled the clerk.

There was only one other up for auction, other than Hilda. The man had obviously been beaten by the drug habit, and had hit the final skids. He'd been given shots preparatory to the bidding, but his eyes still showed the agony of the final bout with the habit. The clerk glanced at his papers, and gobbled into the microphone.

"Williams, garage - mechanic. Petty theft, caught trying to trade off the proceeds. Went crazy and attacked the arresting officers. Now agrees to work willingly in return for basic needs. The employer will get a legal prescription for his drugs, and it's a five year contract with no penalty clause!"

In spite of the fact that normal protections for Williams had been revoked, there was only one bid, from a man who wanted a new helper in a small atomic waste refinery. The last man, he admitted, had died of radioactive poisoning in less than two years, and he protested against raising his bid of a hundred credits when he couldn't count on the full five years. The auctioneer finally agreed that the price was satisfactory.

Gordon got out, before the bidding on the girl could begin. He'd had enough. But he wondered whether Sheila would hold this against him, too, if she heard he'd been the one to deliver the girl. Probably, he supposed. She was good at blaming her own failures on him, and then declaring war, to find something else to hold against him.

Izzy came in when he got back to Mother Corey's, fuming at Trench's campaign to keep Gordon on long hours. But Gordon was too tired to care. He chased the other out, rolled over, and was almost instantly asleep.

The overtime continued, but it was dull after that—which made it even more tiring. And the time he took the special release out to the space-port was the worst. Seeing the big ship readying for take-off back to Earth and the people getting on board did nothing to make Gordon happier about the situation.

Then it was the day before election. The street was already bristling with barricades around the entrances, and everything ran with a last desperate restlessness, as if there would be no tomorrow. The operators all swore Wayne would be elected, but they seemed to fear a miracle. And on the poorer section of the beat, there was a spiritless hope that Murphy might come in with his reform program. Men who would normally have been punctilious about their payments

were avoiding him, as if hoping that by putting it off a day or so they could run into a period where no such payment would ever be asked—or a smaller one, at least. And he was too tired to chase down the ones who could be reached. His collections had been falling off already, and he knew that he'd be on the carpet for that, if he didn't do better. It was a rich territory, and required careful mining; even as the week had gone, he still had more money in his wallet than he had expected.

But it had to be still more before night.

In that, he was lucky. At the last hour, he came on a pusher working one of the better houses in the section—long after his collections should have been over. He knew by the man's face that no protection had been paid higher up. And the pusher was well-heeled, either from a good morning or a draw made to buy more supplies that were necessary to twenty percent of Mars' population. Gordon confiscated the money, realizing it would make up for any shorts in the rest of his collection.

This time, Izzy came up without protests. Lifting the roll of anyone outside the enforced part of Mars' laws was apparently honest, in his eyes. He nodded, and pointed to the man's belt. "Pick up the snow, too," he suggested.

The pusher's face paled. He must have had his total capital with him, because stark ruin shone in his eyes. "Good God, Sergeant," he pleaded. "Leave me something! I'll make it right. I'll cut you in. I gotta have some of that for myself!"

Gordon grimaced. He couldn't work up any great sympathy for anyone who made a living out of drugs. The end product he had seen at the Employment Bureau wasn't pleasant. And the addict wasn't just bedevilled by eventual spasms when his supply was gone—he was constantly haunted by a fear of it, long before.

They cleaned the pusher, and left him sitting on the steps, a picture of slumped misery. Izzy nodded approval. "Let him feel it awhile. No sense jailing him yet. Bloody fool had no business starting without lining the groove. Anyhow, we'll get a bunch of credits for the stuff when we turn it in."

"Credits?" Gordon asked.

"Sure." Izzy patted the little package. "We get a quarter value. Captain probably gets fifty percent from one of the pushers who's lined with him. Everybody's happy."

"Why not push it ourselves?" Gordon asked in disgust.

Izzy shook his head. "Wouldn't

be honest, gov'nor. Cops are supposed to turn it in."

Trench was almost jovial when he weighed the package and examined it to find how much it had been cut. He issued them slips, which they added as part of the contributions. "Good work —you, too, Gordon. Best week in the territory for a couple of months. I guess the citizens like you, the way they treat you." He laughed at his own stale joke, and Gordon was willing to laugh with him. The credit on the dope had paid for most of the contributions. For once, he had money to show for the week.

Then Trench motioned forward, and dismissed Izzy with a nod of his head. "Something to discuss, Gordon. Isaacs, we're holding a little meeting, so wait around. You're a sergeant already. But Gordon, I'm offering you a chance. There aren't enough openings for all the good men, but . . . Oh, bother the soft-soap. We're still short on election funds. So there's a raffle. Two men holding winning tickets get bucked up to sergeants. A hundred credits a ticket. How many?"

He frowned suddenly as Gordon counted out three bills. "You have a better chance with more tickets, Gordon. A *much* better chance!"

The hint was hardly veiled. Gordon stuck the tickets into his wallet, along with the inevitable near-hundred-credits that seemed to be his maximum. It was a fine planet for picking up easy money, but holding it was another matter.

Trench counted the money and put it away. "Thanks, Gordon. That fills my quota. Look, you've been on overtime all week. Why not skip the meeting? Isaacs can brief you, later. Go out and get drunk, or something."

The comparative friendliness of the peace offering was probably the ultimate in graciousness from Trench. Idly, Gordon wondered what kind of pressure the captains were under; it must be pretty stiff, judging by the relief the man was showing at making quota.

"Thanks," Gordon acknowledged, but his voice was bitter in his ears. "I'll go home and rest. Drinking costs too much for what I make. It's a good thing you don't have income tax here."

"We do," Trench said flatly. "Forty per cent. Better make out a form next week, and start paying it regularly. But you can deduct your contributions here."

Gordon got out before he learned more good news. At least, though, at the present rate he wouldn't have too much tax to pay.

VII

As Gordon came out from the precinct house, he noticed the sounds first. Under the huge dome that enclosed the main part of the city, the heavier air-pressure permitted normal travel of sound, and he'd become sensitive to the voice of the city after the relative quiet of the Nineteenth Precinct. But now the normal noise was different. There was an undertone of hushed waiting, with the sharp bursts of hammering and last-minute work standing out sharply through it.

Voting booths were being finished here and there, and at one a small truck was delivering ballots. Voting by machine had never been established here. Wherever the booths were being thrown up, the near-by establishments were rushing gates and barricades in front of the buildings.

Most of the shops were already closed—even some of the saloons. To make up for it, stands were being placed along the streets, carrying banners that proclaimed free beer for all loyal administration friends. The few bars that were still open had been blessed with the sign of some mob, and obviously were well staffed with hoodlums ready to protect the proprietor. Private houses were boarded up. The scattering of last-minute shoppers along the streets showed that most of the citizens were laying in supplies to last until after election, apparently planning to regard it as a siege.

Gordon passed the First Marsport Bank and saw that it was surrounded by barbed wires, with other strands still being strung, and with a sign proclaiming that there was high voltage in the wires. Watching the operation was the flashy figure of Jurgens. From the way the men doing the work looked at him, it was obvious that his hoodlums had been hired for the job.

Toward the edge of the dome where Mother Corey's place was, the narrower streets were filling with the gangs, already half-drunk and marching about with their banners and printed signs. The parades would be starting just after sundown, and would go on until fighting and rioting finally dispelled the last paraders. Curiously enough, all the gangs weren't working for Wayne's re-election. The big Star Point gang had apparently grown tired of the increasing cost of protection from the government, and was actively campaigning for Murphy. Their home territory reached nearly to Mother Corey's, before it ran into the no-man's-land separating it from

the gang of Nick the Croop. The Croopsters were loyal to Wayne.

Gordon turned into his usual short-cut past a rambling plastics plant and through the yard where their trucks were parked. He had half expected to find it barricaded, but apparently the rumors that Nick the Croop owned it were true, and it would be protected in other ways, with the trucks used for street fighting, if needed. He threaded his way between two of the trucks.

Then a yell reached his ears, and something swished at him. An egg-sized rock hit the truck behind him and bounced back, just as he spotted a hoodlum drawing back a sling for a second shot.

Gordon was on his knees between heart-beats, darting under one of the trucks. He rolled to his feet, letting out a yell of his own, and plunged forward. His fist hit the thug in the elbow, just as the man's hand reached for his knife. His other hand chopped around, and the edge of his palm connected with the other's nose. Cartilage crunched, and a shrill cry of agony lanced out.

But the hoodlum wasn't alone. Another came out from the rear of one of the trucks. Gordon ducked as a knife sailed for his head; they were stupid enough not to aim for his stomach, at least. He bent down to locate some of the rubble on the ground, cursing his own folly in carrying his knife under his uniform. The easy work on the new beat had given him a false sense of security.

He found a couple of rocks and a bottle and let them fly, then bent for more.

Something landed on his back, and fingernails were gouging into his face, searching for his eyes!

Instinct carried him forward, jerking down sharply and twisting. The figure on his back sailed over his head, to land with a harsh thump on the ground. Brassy yellow hair spilled over Sheila Corey's face, and her breath slammed out of her throat as she hit. But the fall hadn't been enough to do serious damage.

Gordon jumped forward, bringing his foot up in a savage swing, but she'd rolled, and the blow only glanced against her ribs. She jerked her hand down for a knife, and came to her knees, her lips drawn back against her teeth. "Get him!" she yelled.

The two thugs had held back, but now they began edging in. Gordon slipped back behind another truck, listening for the sound of their feet. They tried to outmaneuver him, as he had expected. He stepped back to his

former spot, catching his breath and digging frantically for his knife. It came out, just as they realized he'd tricked them.

Sheila was still on her knees, fumbling with something, and apparently paying him no attention. But now she jerked to her feet, her hand going back and forward. "Take that—for Hilda!" she shouted.

It was a six-inch section of pipe, with a thin wisp of smoke, and the throw was toward Gordon's feet. The hoodlums yelled, and ducked, while Sheila broke into a run away from him. The little home-made bomb landed, bounced, and lay still, with its fuse almost burned down.

Gordon's heart froze in his throat, but he was already in action. He spat savagely into his hand, and jumped for the bomb. If the fuse was powder-soaked, he had no chances. He brought his palm down against it, pressing the dampness of the spit onto it, and heard a faint hissing. Then he held his breath, waiting for the explosion.

None came. It had been a crude job, with only a wick for a fuse.

Sheila had stopped at a safe distance, and was looking back. Now she grabbed at her helpers, and swung them with her. The three came back, Sheila in the lead with her knife flashing, and the others more cautiously.

Gordon side-stepped her rush, and met the other two head-on, his knife swinging back. His foot hit some of the rubble on the ground at the last second, and he skidded. The leading mobster saw the chance and jumped for him. Gordon bent his head sharply, and dropped, falling onto his shoulders and somersaulting over. He twisted at the last second, jerking his arms down to come up facing the other.

Then a new voice cut into the fracas, and there was the sound of something landing against a skull with a hollow thud. Gordon got his head up just in time to see a man in police uniform kick aside the first hoodlum and lunge for the other. There was a confused flurry, and the second went up into the air and came down in the newcomer's hands, to land with a sickening jar and lie still. Behind, Sheila lay crumpled in a heap, clutching one wrist in the other hand and crying silently.

Gordon came to his feet and started for her. She saw him coming and cast a single glance at the knife that had been knocked from her hands. Then she sprang aside and darted back through the parked trucks, toward the street where she could lose herself in the swarm of Nick's Croopsters. Gordon turned back toward his rescuer.

The iron-gray hair caught his eyes first. Then, as the solidly built-figure turned, he grunted. It was Captain Whaler—but now dressed in the uniform of a regular beat cop, without even a corporal's stripes. And the face was filled with the lines of strain that hadn't been there before.

He threw the second gangster up into a truck after the first one and slammed the door shut, locking it with the metal bar which had apparently been his weapon. Then he grinned wryly, and came back toward Gordon.

"You seem to have friends here," he commented. "A good thing I was trying to catch up with you. Just missed you at the Precinct House, came after you, and saw you turn in here. Then I heard the rumpus. A good thing for me, too, maybe."

Gordon blinked, accepting the other's hand. "How so? And what happened?" He indicated the bare sleeve.

"One's the result of the other," Whaler told him. "They've got me sewed up, and they're throwing the book at me. The old laws make me a citizen while I wear the uniform—and a citizen can't quit the Force. That puts me out of Earth's jurisdiction. I can't cable for funds, even—and I guess I'm too old to start squeezing money out of citizens who don't have it to hand out. So I can't afford the rooms here. I was coming to ask whether you had room in your diggings for a guest—and I'm hoping now that my part here cinches it."

He had tried to treat it lightly, but Gordon saw the red creeping up into the man's face. "Forget that part," he told Whaler. "There's room enough for two in my place—and I guess Mother Corey won't mind. I'm damned glad you were following me."

"So'm I, Gordon. What'll we do with the prisoners?"

"We couldn't get a Croopster locked up tonight for anything. Let them rot until their friends come along."

He started ahead, leading the way through the remaining trucks and back to the street that led to Mother Corey's. Whaler fell in step with him. The man's voice was dead with fatigue, now that the excitement had worn off. "This is the first time I've had free to look you up," he said. "I've been going out nights to help the citizens organize against the Stonewall gang. But that's over now—they gave me hell for inciting vigilante action, and confined me inside the dome. The way they hate a decent cop here, you'd think honesty was contagious."

"Yeah." Gordon preferred to let it drop. Whaler was being

given the business for going too far on the Stonewall gang, not for refusing to take normal graft. Anyhow, he'd never seen any evidence that honesty was catching. He'd been an honest rooky on Earth himself; and the men who'd gotten farthest had been the very ones against whom most of the evidence had turned up when Gordon was ferreting out corruption as a reporter. Honesty was fine—in its place.

They came to the gray three-story building that Mother Corey now owned. Gordon stopped, realizing for the first time that there was no sign of efforts to protect it against the coming night and day. The entrance was unprotected by even a sign of a gate. Then his eyes caught the bright chalk marks around it—signs to the gangs to keep hands off. If they were authentic, Mother Corey had pull enough to get every mob in the neighborhood to affix its seal.

As he drew near, though, he found that other steps had been taken. Two men edged across the street from a clump watching the beginning excitement. Then, as they identified Gordon, they moved back again. Some of the Mother's old lodgers from the ruin outside the dome were inside now—and obviously posted where it would do the most good.

Corey stuck his head out of the door at the back of the hall as Gordon entered, and started to retire again, until he spotted Whaler. Gordon explained the situation hastily.

"It's your room, cobber," the old man wheezed. He waddled back, to come out with a towel and key, and handed them to Whaler. "Number forty-two."

His heavy hand rested on Gordon's arm, holding the younger man back. Whaler stared at them a second, then took the hint. He gave Gordon a brief, tired smile, and started for the stairs. "Thanks, Gordon. I'm turning in right now."

Mother Corey shook his head, shaking the few hairs on his head and face, and the wrinkles in his doughy skin deepened. "Hasn't changed, that one. Must be thirty years, but I'd know Ira Whaler anywhere. Took me to the spaceport, handed me my yellow ticket, and sent me off for Mars. A nice, clean kid—just like my own boy was. But he wasn't like the rest of the neighborhood. He still called me 'sir,' when my boy was walking across the street so he wouldn't know they were sending me away. Oh well, that was a long time ago, cobber. A long time."

He rubbed a pasty hand over his chin, shaking his head ponderously, wheezing heavily. Gordon waited, vaguely curious

about the reasons behind Corey's being sent off. But on Mars, that was a man's private business. Corey grimaced, and chuckled. "Well, how—?"

Something banged heavily against the entrance seal, and there was the sound of a hot argument, followed by a commotion of some sort. Corey seemed to prick up his ears, and began to waddle rapidly toward the entrance.

But it broke open before he could reach it, the seal snapping back to show a giant of a man outside holding the two guards from across the street, while a scar-faced, dark man shoved through briskly. Corey snapped out a quick word, and the two guards ceased struggling, and started back across the street. The giant pushed in after the smaller thug.

"I'm from the Ajax Householders Protection Group," the dark man announced officially. "We're selling election protection. And brother, do you need it, if you're counting on those mugs. We're assessing you —"

"Not long on Mars, are you?" Mother Corey asked. The whine was entirely missing from his voice now, though his face seemed as expressionless as ever. "What's your boss Jurgens figure on doing, punk? Taking over *all* the rackets for the whole city?"

The dark face snarled, while the giant moved a step forward. Scarface's fingers twitched nervously toward a knife that rested on his hip. Then he shrugged. "Okay, Fatty. So Jurgens is behind it. So now you know. And I'm doubling your assessment, right now. To you it's —"

A heavy hand fell on the man's shoulder, and Mother Corey leaned forward slightly. Even in Mars' gravity, his bulk made the other buckle at the knees. The hand that had been reaching for the knife yanked the weapon out and brought it up sharply.

Gordon started to step in, then, but there was no time. Mother Corey's free hand came around in an open-palmed slap that lifted the collector up from the floor and sent him reeling back against a wall. The knife fell from the crook's hand, and the dark face turned pale. He seemed to sag down the wall, to end up on the floor, out cold.

The giant opened his mouth and took half a step forward. But the only sound he made was a choking gobble. Mother Corey moved without seeming haste, but before the other could make up his mind. There was a series of motions that seemed to have no pattern. The giant was spun around, somehow; one arm was

jerked back behind him, then the other was forced up to it. Mother Corey held the wrists in one hand, put his other under the giant's crotch, and lifted. Carrying the big figure off the floor, the old man moved toward the seal. His foot found the button, snapping the entrance open. He pitched the giant out overhanded, to land squarely on the flat face and skid across the rough surface of the street. Holding the entrance, he reached for the dark man with one hand and tossed him on top of the giant.

"To me, it's nothing," he called out. "Take these two back to young Jurgens, boys, and tell him to keep his punks out of my house."

The entrance snapped shut then, and Corey turned back to Gordon, wiping the wisps of hair from his face. He was still wheezing asthmatically, but there seemed to be no change in the rhythm of his breathing. "As I was going to say, cobber," he said, "we've got a little social game going upstairs—the room with the window. Fine view of the parades. We need a fourth."

Gordon started to protest that he was tired and needed his sleep. Then he shrugged. Corey's house was one of the few that had kept some relation to Earth styles by installing a couple of windows in the second story, and it would give a perfect view of the street. He followed the old man up the stairs.

Two other men were already in the surprisingly well-furnished room, at the little table set up near the window. Gordon recognized one as Randolph, the publisher of the little opposition paper. The man's pale blondeness, weak eyes, and generally rabbitty expression totally belied the courage that had permitted him to keep going at his hopeless task of trying to clean up Marsport. The *Crusader* was strictly a one-man weekly, against the strength of Mayor Wayne's *Chronicle*, with its Earth-comics and daily circulation of over a hundred thousand. Wayne apparently let Randolph keep in business to give him a talking point about fair play; but the little paper's history had been filled with trouble, wrecked presses, ruined paper, and everything the crooks whom Randolph had attacked had been able to think of. The man himself walked with a limp from the last working over he had received.

"Hi, Gordon," he said. His thin, high voice was cool and reserved, in keeping with the opinion he had expressed publicly of the police as a body. But he did not protest Corey's selection of a partner. "This is Ed Aims-

worth. He's an engineer on our railroad."

Gordon acknowledged the introduction automatically. He'd almost forgotten that Marsport was the center of a thinly populated area stretching for a thousand miles in all directions beyond the city, connected by the winding link of the electric monorail. "So there really is a surrounding countryside," he said.

Aimsworth nodded. He was a big, open-faced man, just turning bald. His handshake was firm and friendly. "There are even cities out there, Gordon. Nothing like Marsport, but that's no loss. That's where the real population of Mars is—decent people, men who are going to turn this into a real planet some day."

"There are plenty like that here, too," Randolph said. He picked up the cards. "First ace deals. Damn it, Mother, sit downwind from me, won't you? Or else take a bath."

Mother Corey chuckled, and wheezed his way up out of the chair, exchanging places with Gordon. In spite of the perfume, his effluvium was still thick and sour. "I got a surprise for you, ccbber," he said, and there was only amusement in his voice. "I got me fifty gallons of water today, and tomorrow I do just that. Made up my mind there was going to be a clean-up in Marsport, even if Wayne does win. And stop examining the cards, Bruce. I don't cheat my friends. The readers are put away for old times' sake."

Randolph shrugged, and went on as if he hadn't interrupted himself. "Ninety percent of Marsport is decent. They have to be. It takes at least nine honest men to support a crook. They come up here to start over—maybe spent half their life saving up for the trip. They hear a man can make fifty credits a day in the factories, or strike it rich crop prospecting. What they don't realize is that things cost ten times as much here, too. They plan, maybe on getting rich and going back to Earth . . ."

"Nobody goes back," Mother Corey wheezed. "*I* know." His eyes rested on Gordon.

"A lot don't want to," Aimsworth said. "I never meant to go back. I've got me a farm up north. Another ten years, and I retire to it. My kids are up there now—grandkids, that is. They're Martians. Maybe you won't believe me, but they can breathe the air here without a helmet."

The others nodded. Gordon had learned that a fair number of third generation people got that way. Their chests were only a trifle larger, and their heart-beat only a few points higher; it was an internal adaptation, like the

one that had occurred in test animals reared at a simulated forty-thousand feet altitude on Earth, before Mars was ever settled.

"They'll take the planet away from Earth yet," Randolph agreed. "Marsport is strictly artificial. It's kept going only because it's the only place where Earth will set down her ships. If Security doesn't do anything, time will."

"Security!" Gordon muttered bitterly. They were good at getting people in trouble, but he had seen no other sign of them.

Randolph frowned over his cards. "Yeah, I know. The government set them up, gave them a mixture of powers, and has been trying to keep them from working ever since. But somehow, they did clean up Venus. And every crook here is scared to death of the name. How come a muck-raking newspaperman like you never turned up anything on them, Gordon?"

Gordon shrugged. It was the first reference he'd heard to his background, and he preferred to let it drop.

But Mother Corey cut in, his voice older and hoarser, and the skin on his jowls even grayer than usual. "Don't sell them short, cobber. I did—once . . . You forget them, here, after a while. But they're around . . ."

Gordon felt something run down his armpit, and a chill creep up his back. His trick report suddenly floated up in front of his mental eye, along with the deadly sureness of the Security man back on Earth. If they were here—and if they were a genuine power . . .

Out on the street, a sudden whooping began, and he glanced down. The parade was finally outside. The Croopsters were in full swing, already mostly drunk. The main body went down the street, waving fluorescent signs, while side-guards preceded them, armed with axes, knocking aside the flimsier barricades as they went. He watched a group break into a small grocery store to come out with bundles. They dragged out the storekeeper, his wife, and young daughter, and pressed them into the middle of the parade.

"If they're so damned powerful, why don't they stop that?" he asked bitterly.

Randolph grinned at him. "They might do it, Gordon. They just might. It can't go on much longer. But are you sure you want it stopped?"

"All right," Mother Corey said suddenly. "This is a social game, cobbers."

Outside, the parade picked up enthusiasm as smaller gangs joined behind the main one.

There were a fair number of plain citizens who had been impressed into it, too, judging by the appearance of little frightened groups in the middle of the mobsters.

He couldn't understand why the police hadn't at least been kept on duty, until Honest Izzy came into the room. The little man found a chair and bought chips, silently, shaking his head. He looked tired, as if he'd had a rough time working his way back from the station without being caught in the swarm down there.

"Vacation?" Mother Corey asked.

Izzy nodded. "Trench took forever giving it to us, Mother. But it's the same old deal. All the police gees get tomorrow off. You, too, gov'nor. No cops to influence the vote, that's the word. We even gotta wear civvies when we go out to vote for Wayne. A bloody mess, that's what it is."

Gordon looked down at the rioters, who were now only keeping up a pretense of a parade. It would be worse tomorrow, he supposed. And there would be no cops. The image of the old woman and her husband in the little liquor store where he'd had his first experience came back to him. He wondered how well barricaded they were.

He felt the curious eyes of Mother Corey dancing from him to Izzy and back, and heard the old man's chuckle. "Put a uniform on some men and they begin to believe they're cops, eh, cobber?"

He shoved up from the table abruptly and headed for his room, swearing to himself. Damn it, if the couple couldn't take care of themselves, they had no business in a town like this. If . . .

He kicked open his door and began shucking off his uniform, cursing the lot of them. Randolph and his incessant, hopeless crusading; Mother Corey and his needling; Izzy and his tangled ethics; and even Whaler, sleeping peacefully on the bed, as if he didn't have a thing to worry about.

Damn the whole stupid planet. Somehow, once the elections were over, he'd have to step up his collections. He'd have to get in better with Trench, too. Another three months on Mars and he'd be as crazy as the rest of them.

He lay down on the bed, fuming, and listening to the quiet snoring of Whaler, while the distant sounds of the mob outside came through the walls.

It was just beginning to quiet down a little towards morning when he went to sleep.

VIII

Izzy was up first the next morning, urging them to hurry before things began to hum. From somewhere, he dug up a suit of clothes that Whaler could wear. He found the gun Gordon had confiscated from O'Neill and filled it from a box of ammunition he'd apparently purchased.

"I picked up some special permits," he said. "I knew you had this cannon, gov'nor, and I figured it'd come in handy. Wouldn't be caught dead with one myself. Knives, that's my specialty. Come on, Cap'n, we gotta get out the vote."

Whaler shook his head. "In the first place, I'm not registered," he began.

Izzy grinned. "Every cop's registered in his own precinct. Wayne got the honor system fixed for us. Show your papers and go into any booth in your territory. That's all. And you'd better be seen voting often, too, Cap'n. What's your precinct?"

"Eleventh. But I'm not voting." Whaler brushed Izzy's protest aside. "I'd like to come along with you to observe, but I wouldn't butt into any choice between two such men as Wayne and Murphy."

Downstairs, the rear room was locked, with one of Mother Corey's guards at the door. From inside came the rare sound of water splashing, mixed with a wheezing, off-key caterwauling. Mother Corey was apparently making good on his promise to take a bath. But they had no time to exchange jokes with the man on guard. As they reached the hall, one of Trench's lieutenants came through the entrance, waving his badge at the protesting man outside.

He spotted the three, and jerked his thumb. "Come on, you. We're late. And I ain't staying on the streets when it gets going."

A small police car was waiting outside, and they headed for it. Gordon looked at the debacle left behind the drunken, looting mob. Most of the barricades were down. Here and there, a few citizens were rushing about trying to restore them, keeping wary eyes on the mobsters who had passed out on the streets. Across the way, a boy of about sixteen sat with his arm around a girl of under nine. She was crying softly, and he was trying to comfort her, his own face pinched white with fear and horror. Trailing down the steps were the garments of a woman, though there was no sign of what had happened to her.

Suddenly a siren blasted out in sharp bursts, and the lieutenant jumped. He leaped into the

car. "Come on, you gees: I gotta be back in half an hour."

They piled inside, and the little electric car took off at its top speed. But now the quietness had been broken. There were trucks coming out of the plastics plant, and mobsters were gathering up their drunks, and chasing the citizens back into their houses. Some of them were wearing the forbidden guns, but it wouldn't matter on a day when no police were on duty.

In the Ninth Precinct, the Planters were the biggest gang, and all the others were temporarily enrolled under them. Here, there were less signs of trouble. The joints had been better barricaded, and the looting had been kept to a minimum.

The three got off. A scooter pulled up alongside them almost at once, with a gun-carrying mobster riding it. "You mugs get the hell out of—oh, cops! Okay, better pin these on."

He handed out gaudy armbands, and the three fastened them in place. Nearly everyone else already had them showing. The Planters were moving efficiently. They were grouped around the booths, and they had begun to line up their men, putting them in position to begin voting at once.

Then the siren hooted again, a long steady blast. The bunting in front of the booths was pulled off, and the lines began to move. Izzy led the way to the one at the rich end of their beat, and moved toward the head of the line. "Cops," he said to the six mobsters who surrounded the booth. "We got territory to cover."

A thumb indicated that they could go in. Whaler remained outside, and one of the thugs reached for him. Izzy cut him off. "Just a friend on the way to his own route. Eleventh precinct."

There were scowls, but they let it go. Then Gordon was in the little booth. It seemed to be in order. There were the books of registration, with a checker for Wayne, one for Murphy, and a third supposedly neutral behind the plank that served as a desk. The Murphy man was protesting.

"He's been dead for ten years. I know him. He's my uncle."

"There's a Mike Thaler registered, and this guy says he's Thaler," the Wayne man said decisively. "He votes."

The Murphy man was starting a protest again when one of the Planters shoved his way inside. He passed his gun to the inspector for the Wayne side, and went out. The Murphy man studied the gun, gulped, and nodded. "He votes. Heh-heh, yes, just a mix-up. He's registered, so he votes."

The next man was one that Gordon recognized from one of the small shops on his beat. The fellow's eyes were desperate, but he was forcing himself to go through with it. "Murtagh," he said, and his voice broke on the second syllable. "Owen Murtagh."

"Murtang. Murtang. No registration!" The Wayne man shrugged. "Next!"

"It's Murtagh. M-U-R-T-A-G-H. Owen Murtagh, of 738 Morrisy . . ."

"Protest!" The Wayne man cut off the frantic wriggling of the Murphy man's finger toward the line in the book. "When a man can't get the name straight the first time, it's pretty damned suspicious."

The supposedly neutral man nodded. "Better check the name off, unless the real Murtagh shows up. Any objections, Yeoman?"

The Murphy man had no objections—outwardly. He was sweating, and the surprise in his eyes indicated that this was all new to him. He was probably a one-year man, unaware of what he'd been getting into.

Gordon came next, showing his badge. He was passed with a nod, and headed for the little closed-off polling place. But the Wayne man touched his arm and indicated a ballot. There were two piles, and this pile was already filled out for Wayne. "Saves trouble, unless you want to do it yourself," he suggested.

Gordon shrugged, and shoved it into the slot. He went outside and waited for Izzy to follow. It was raw beyond anything he'd expected—but at least it saved any doubt as to how the votes were cast.

The procedure was the same at the next booth, though they had more trouble. The Murphy man there was a fool—which meant he was neither green nor agreeable. He protested vigorously, in spite of a suspicious bruise along his temple. Finally, he made some of his protests stick. There was a conference going on among the Planters as they left, and more were arriving. They couldn't get all their votes put through—but they could scare off all opposition voting.

Gordon began to wonder how it could be anything but a clear unanimous vote, at that rate. But Izzy shook his head. "Wayne'll win. But not that easy. The sticks don't have strong mobs, and they pile up a heavy Murphy vote. And you'll see things hum soon!"

Gordon had voted three times under the "honor system," before he saw. They were just nearing a polling place when a heavy

truck came careening around a corner. Men came piling out of the back before it stopped—men armed with clubs and stones. They were in the middle of the Planters almost at once, striking without any science, but with a surprising ferocity. The line waiting to vote broke up, but the citizens had apparently organized carefully. A good number of the men in the line were with the attackers.

There was the sound of a shot, and a horrified cry. For a second, the citizens broke. Then a wave of fury seemed to wash over them at the needless risk to the safety of all. The horror of rupturing the dome was strongly engrained on every citizen of Marsport. They drew back, and then made a concerted rush. There was a trample of bodies, but no more shots.

In a minute, the citizens' group was inside the voting place, ripping the fixed ballots to shreds, and racing to fill out and drop their own. They were paying no attention to the registration clerks.

A whistle had been shrilling for minutes. Now another group came onto the scene, and the Planters men began getting out, rapidly. Some of the citizens looked up and yelled, but it was too late. From the approaching cars, pipes projected forward. Streams of liquid jetted out, and there was an agonized cry from the mob that had not yet escaped.

Even where he stood, Gordon could smell the fumes of ammonia. Izzy's face tensed, and he swore. "Inside the dome! They're poisoning the air."

But the trick worked. In no time, men in crude masks were clearing out the booth, driving the last few struggling citizens away, and getting ready for business as usual. All the registration clerks were missing, but the head Planters man picked out three at random and installed them. Probably all the ballots from that booth would be declared invalid, but they were taking no chances.

Whaler turned on his heel. "I've had enough. I've made up my mind," he said. "The cable offices must be open for the doctored reports on the election to Earth. Where's the nearest?"

Izzy frowned, but supplied the information. Gordon pulled Whaler aside. "Come off the head cop role," he told Whaler. "It won't work. They must have had reports on elections before this. And nothing came of it."

"Damn the trouble. It's never been this raw before. Look at Izzy's face, Gordon. Even he's shocked. Something has to be done about this, before worse

happens. I've still got connections back there—"

"Okay," Gordon said bitterly. He'd liked Whaler, like a fool. He'd begun to respect him. It hurt to see that what he'd considered hard-headedness was just another case of a fool fighting dragons with a paper sword. But he should have expected it. The publisher of the newspaper back on Earth had been carrying on a fight to the bitter end against exploitation of the planets—but when Gordon was picked up by Security for digging up the one thing that could do most for the cause, he'd gone off in a spasm of horror at the idea of Gordon's using top secret stuff.

"Okay, it's your death certificate," he said, and turned back toward Izzy. "Go send your sob stories, Whaler."

They taught a bunch of pretty maxims in school—even slum kids learned that honesty was the best policy, while their honest parents rotted in unheated holes and the racketeers rode around in fancy cars. They made pretty speeches over the radio, and showed pretty stories on television. It got the suckers. It had got him once. He'd refused to take a dive as a boxer, and wound up as a cop. He'd tried to play honest cards and count on his wits, and had almost starved—and had to give up because he couldn't pay off the police. He'd tried honesty on his beat back there, and been made a scapegoat for his sergeant. He'd tried to help the suckers in his column, and he was here as a result.

And he still felt himself slipping back. He'd been proud to serve under Whaler, at a cop's salary. Okay, he'd seen enough; all they had to offer a man was things on paper and an appeal to an outside justice that never came. From now on, he'd go back to taking care of number one. Let them depend on their damned rule books. A man's own muscle was all that counted, and he was going to need plenty of muscle.

"Come on, Izzy," he said. "Let's vote!"

Izzy shook his head. "It ain't right, gov'nor."

"Let him do what he damn pleases," Gordon told him.

Izzy's small face puckered up in lines of worry. "No, I don't mean him. I mean this business of using ammonia. I know some of the gees trying to vote. They been paying me off—and that's a retainer, you might say. Now this gang tries to poison them. I'm still running an honest beat, and I bloody well can't vote for that! Uniform or no uniform, I'm walking beat today. And the first gee that gives trouble to the men who pay me gets a knife

where he eats. When I get paid for a job, I do the job."

Gordon watched him head down the block, and started after the little man. Then he grimaced.

He went down the row, voting regularly. The Planters had things in order. There were small skirmishes here and there, and a small mob had obviously been hired to help the citizens in one place, toward the cheaper end of the beat. But the mess had already been cleaned up when he arrived. It was the last place where he expected to do his duty by Wayne's administration, and he waited in line, watching the feet of the thug ahead of him.

Then a voice hit at his ears, and he looked up to see Sheila Corey only two places in front of him. "Mrs. Mary Edelstein," she was saying. The Wayne man nodded, without bothering to check, and there was no protest. She picked up a Wayne ballot, and dropped it in the box.

Then her eyes fell on Gordon, and creased to slits. She hesitated for a second, bit her lips, and finally moved out into the crowd.

He could see no sign of her as he stepped out a minute later, but the back of his neck prickled. Now, in the crowd of her own type, she'd have a chance that she couldn't miss. Even if she'd only rented her services to the Planters, they'd protect her. And one cop, more or less, wouldn't matter.

He started out of the crowd, trying to act normal, but glancing down to make sure the gun was in its proper position. Satisfied, he pivoted suddenly. For a second, he spotted her behind him, before she could slip out of sight.

Then a shout went up, yanking his eyes around with the rest of those standing near. The eyes had centered on the alleys along the street, and men were beginning to run wildly, while others were jerking out their weapons. He saw a gray car, almost big enough to be the mayor's, coming up the street; on its side was painted the colors of the Planters. Now it swerved, hitting a siren button.

But it was too late. Trucks shot out of the little alleys, jamming forwards through the people. There must have been fifty of them. One hit the big gray car, tossing it aside. It was Trench himself who leaped out, together with the driver. The trucks paid no attention, but bore down on the crowd. From one of them, a machine gun opened fire.

Gordon dropped and began crawling in the only direction that was open, toward the

alleys from which the trucks had come. A few others had tried that, but most were darting back as they saw the colors of Murphy's Star Point gang on the trucks.

Other guns began firing, and men were leaping from the trucks and pouring into the mob of Planters, forcing their way toward the booth in the center of the mess.

It was a beautifully timed surprise attack. And it was a well armed one, even though guns were supposed to be so rare here. Gordon stumbled into someone ahead of him, and saw it was Trench. He looked up, and straight into the swinging muzzle of the machine gun that had started the commotion.

Trench was reaching for his revolver, but he was going to be too late. Gordon brought his up the extra half inch, aiming by the feel, and pulled the trigger. The man behind the machine gun dropped, with a sick expression, his fingers clutching at the blood that was beginning to saturate the clothing around his stomach.

Trench had his gun out now, and was firing, after a single surprised glance at Gordon. He waved back toward the crowd.

But Gordon had spotted the open truck of the gray car, and it offered better safety than the emptying street. He shook his head, and tried to indicate it. Trench jerked his thumb, and leaped to his feet, rushing back. Some kind of a command sounded over the fighting, but Gordon had nc time to try to puzzle it out.

He saw another truck go by, and felt a bullet miss him by inches. Then his legs were under him, and he was sliding into the big luggage compartment, where the metal would shield him from most of the danger.

Something soft under his feet threw him down. He felt a body under him, and coldness washed over him before he could get his eyes down. The cold went away, to be replaced by shock.

Between his spread knees lay Whaler, bound and gagged, and with his face a bloody mass of torn and bruised flesh. Only the man's open eyes showed that he was alive.

Gordon reached for the gag, but the other held up his hands and pointed to the gun. It made sense. The knots were tight, but Gordon managed to get his knife under the rope around Whaler's wrists and slice through it. The older man's hands went out for the gun, and his eyes swung toward the street, while Gordon attacked the rope around his ankles. Then his own eyes swept what he could see from the opened lid of the trunk.

The Star Point men were win-

ning, but it was tough going. They had fought their way almost to the booth, but there a V of Planters gang cars had been gotten into position somehow, and gun fire was coming from behind them. As he watched, a huge man reached over one of the cars, picked up a Star Point man, and lifted him behind the barricade.

The gag had just come out when the Star Point man jumped into view again, waving a rag over his head and yelling. Captain Trench followed him out, and began pointing toward the gray car where Gordon and Whaler were.

"They want me," Whaler gasped thickly. "Get out, Gordon, before they gang up on us!"

It made no sense, yet there was a small nucleus of men from both gangs trying to head toward the car. Gordon jerked his eyes back toward the alley on the other side. It went at an angle and would offer some protection, if they could make it.

He looked back, just as bullets began to land against the metal of the car. Whaler held up one finger and put himself into a position to make a run for it. Then he brought the finger down sharply, and the two men leaped out.

Trench's ex-Marine bellow carried over the fighting. "Get the old man!"

Gordon had no time to look back. He hit the alley in five heart-ripping leaps and was around the bend. Then he swung just as Whaler made it. Bullets spatted against the walls, but at first Gordon thought they had both escaped uninjured. Then he saw the blood pumping under Whaler's right shoulder.

"Keep going!" Whaler ordered.

A fresh cry from the street cut into his order, however. Gordon raised a quick look, and then stepped further out to make sure.

The surprise raid by the Star Pointers hadn't been quite as much of a surprise as they'd expected. Coming down the street, with no regard for men trying to get out from their way, the trucks of the Croopsters were roaring all out, battering aside the few who could not reach safety. There were no machine guns this time, but the straightforward drive of the trucks themselves were danger enough.

They smacked into the tangle of Star Point trucks, and came to a grinding halt, with men piling out ready for battle. Gordon nodded. In a few minutes, Wayne's supporters would have the booth again, and there'd be

a long delay before any organized search could be made for the two of them. He looked down at Whaler's shoulder, and calculated as rapidly as his still-scant knowledge of the city permitted.

"Come on," he said finally. "Or should I carry you?"

Whaler shook his head. "I'll walk. Get me to a place where we can talk—and be damned to this. Gordon, I've got to talk—but I don't have to live. I mean that!"

Gordon started off, disregarding the words. A place of safety had to come first. And for whatever reason, sooner or later Trench would be looking for them. It had taken something pretty serious to get the nucleus of Star Pointers working with the Planters. Nobody would trust a strange couple on a day like this—but there was one faint chance, if he was right.

He picked his way down alleys and small streets, with Whaler following. The older man kept trying to stop to speak, but Gordon gave him no chance. He was lucky to be in a poor section, where a few thugs would be enough to control things, and where there was little chance of gang wars to hold him up. Too, the defeated hopeless condition of the poorer inhabitants of Marsport would make most of the streets deserted at a time like this.

It was further than he thought and he began to suspect he'd missed the way, until he saw the drugstore. Now it all fell into place—the beat he'd first had with Izzy, before he was pulled off it and shipped out to the Nineteenth Precinct.

He ducked down back alleys, until he reached the right section. Then there was no chance, he wouldn't have known the rear entrance if there had been one. He scanned the street and jumped to the door of the little liquor store and began banging on it. There was no answer, though he was sure the old couple lived just over the store. Here there had been no looting, apparently, since the section was too poor to provide a good target.

He began banging again. Finally, a feeble voice sounded from inside. "Who is it?"

"A man in distress!" he yelled back. There was no way to identify himself as the man who had chased off the racketeers and returned their money. He could only hope she would look.

The entrance seal opened briefly. Then it flashed open all the way. He motioned to Whaler, and jumped to help the failing man to the entrance. The old lady looked, then moved quickly to the other side. Whaler was

about done in. He leaned on the two of them, panting.

"Ach, God," she breathed. Her hands trembled as she relocked the seal. Then she brushed the thin hair off her face, and pointed. He followed her up the stairs, carrying Whaler on his back. She opened a door, passed through a tiny kitchen, and threw open another door to a bedroom.

The old man lay on the bed, and this time there was no question of concussion. A club had bashed in his head, bringing almost instant death. The woman nodded. "Yes. Papa is dead, God forbid it. He *would* try to vote. I told him and told him—and then . . . With my own hands, I carried him here."

Gordon felt sick. He started to turn, but she shook her head quickly. "No. Papa is dead. He needs no beds now, and your friend is suffering. Put him here."

She lifted the frail old body of the man from the bedding, and lowered him onto the floor with a strength that seemed impossible to her. Then her hands were gentle as she helped lower Whaler where the corpse had been. "I'll get alcohol from below —and bandages and hot water."

Whaler opened his eyes, breathing stertorously. His face was blanched, and his clothes were a mess. But he protested as Gordon tried to strip them. "Let them go, kid. There's no way to save me now. And listen!"

"I'm listening!"

"With your mind, Gordon, not your ears. You've heard a lot about Security. Well, I'm Security. Top level—policy for Mars. We never got a top man here without his being discovered and killed—a leak, somehow. That's why we've had to work under all the cover—and against our own government, as always. Damned nationalism! Nobody knew I was here—men we thought loyal to us are with the grafters. Trench was our man—we sent him here. Thought he was still level-ling. Sold us out! We've got junior men—down to your level, clerks, such things. We've got a dozen plans. But we're not ready for an emergency, and it's here—now! Gordon, you're a self-made louse, but you're a man underneath it somewhere. That's why we rate you higher than you think you are. That's why I'm going to trust you—because I have to."

He swallowed, and the thin hand of the woman lifted brandy to his lips. "Papa," she said slowly. "He was a clerk once for Security. But nobody came, nobody called . . ."

She went back to trying to bandage the bleeding bluish hole

in his chest. Whaler nodded faintly.

"Probably what happened to a lot—men like Trench, supposed to build an organization, just leaving the loose ends hanging. But—Anyhow, they had me trailed since—since they yanked me off the Nineteenth—maybe before. When I headed for the cable office, they picked me up, fast." He groaned, gritted his teeth, and grimaced. Sweat popped out on his forehead, but his eyes never left Gordon's. "Hell's going to pop. The Government's just waiting to step in and chuck the government here out the window. Earth *wants* to take over."

"It should," Gordon said.

"No! We've studied these things. Mars won't give up—and Earth wants a plum, not responsibility. You'll have civil war and the whole planetary development ruined. Security's the only hope, Gordon—the only chance Mars had, has, or will have! Believe me, I know. Security has to be notified. There's a code message I had ready—a message to a friend—even you can send it; and they'll be watching. I've got the basic plans in the book here —Aaah!"

He slumped back. Gordon frowned, then found the book and pulled it out as gently as he could. It was a small black memo book, covered with pages of shorthand. The back was an address book, filled with names —many crossed out, as he could see. A sheet of paper in normal writing fell out.

"The message," Whaler said. His voice was getting thick and faint. He took another swallow of brandy. "Take it. You're head of Security on Mars now. It's all authorized in the plans there. You'll need the brains and knowledge of the others—but they can't act. You can—we know that much about you."

The old woman sighed, and shook her head over the bandages. She put down the hot water and picked up the bottle of brandy, starting down the stairs.

"Gordon!" Whaler said faintly.

He turned to put his head down. From the stairs, a sudden cry and thump sounded, and something hit the floor. Gordon jumped toward the sound, to find the old lady bending over the inert figure of Sheila Corey.

"I heard someone," the woman said. She stared at the brandy bottle sickly. "God in heavens, look at me. Am I a killer too that I should strike a young and beautiful girl. She comes into my house, and I sneak behind her . . . It is an evil time, young man. Here, you carry her inside. I'll get some twine to tie her up. The idea, spying on you!"

Gordon picked the girl up roughly. That capped it, he thought. There was no way of knowing how much she'd heard, or whether she'd tipped others off. He should have guessed she'd follow him, even if no one else did. And they hadn't locked the seal properly.

But she was still out. He dropped her near the bed, and went over to Whaler. The man was dying now.

"So Security wants me to contact the others in the book and organize things?" he asked.

"Yes." Whaler swallowed. His eyes were becoming unfocussed, but his mind was still on his duty. "Not a good chance, then—but a chance. Still time—I think. Gordon?"

"What else can I do?" Gordon asked.

He knew it was no answer, but Whaler apparently accepted it as a promise. The gray-speckled head relaxed and rolled sideways on the bloody pillow. The hand that had been touching the book dropped. And the blood stopped spurting from around the hole in his chest. Gordon knew he was dead.

"Dead," he said to the woman as she came up with the twine. "Dead, fighting windmills. And maybe winning. I don't know."

Then he turned towards Sheila.

But in that, he was a split second too late. The girl came up from the floor with a single push of her arm. She pivoted on her heel, hit the door, and her heels were clattering on the stairs. Before Gordon could reach the entrance, she was whipping around into an alley. There, in the confusion of the maze of backstreet Marsport, nobody could catch her.

He watched her go, sick inside, and the last he saw was the hand she held up, waving the little black book at him!

He turned back into the liquor shop, where the woman stood on the stairs watching. She seemed to read his face, and her own expression darkened. "I should have watched her. It is a bad day for me, young man. I failed papa, I failed the poor man who died—and now I have failed you. It is better . . ."

He caught her as she fell toward him. She relaxed after a second. "Upstairs, please," she whispered. "Beside papa. There was nothing else. And these Martian poisons—they are so sure, they don't hurt—much. Five minutes more, I think. Stay with me, I'll tell you how papa and I got married. I want somebody should know how it was with us once, together."

He stayed. Then he picked the two bodies up and moved them

from the floor onto the bed where he had first seen the old man. He moved Whaler's body aside, and covered the two gently. Finally, he went down the stairs, carrying Whaler with him. The man's weight was a stiff load, even on Mars, but somehow he couldn't leave it with the old couple to add to the scandal around their death.

He stopped finally, ten blocks of narrow alleys away, and put Whaler down.

Security, if it ever came, would probably blame him for the death of Whaler—with some gentle hints from Trench. If it didn't come, Trench knew that he had run off with Whaler, and there was already a suspicion in the Captain's mind that he was somehow involved with the hated Solar Security. Sheila had the book, for that matter, with his name probably in it. And she'd probably heard Whaler call him the head of Security.

He heard the sound of a mobile amplifier, and strained his ears toward it at last. There was a bustle from above beginning now, as if the tenements around the alley were coming to life, and it took time to focus through to the sound of the speaker. Then he got enough to know that Wayne had won a thumping victory of better than three to two. Murphy had conceded.

Which meant that Trench was still Captain of the Seventh Precinct.

He stared around, realizing it was dark. It must have been dark when he carried Whaler's body out, now that he thought of it; he'd taken no precautions against being seen, at least. How long had he sat after the old lady died, battling with the same problem that was confronting him now?

It didn't matter. He summed it up once again. Head of the hated Security on Mars, with an enemy to testify to it against him, and with no information—that, too, was in enemy hands. A cop who'd aided the escape of the one man his Captain most wanted to keep. A man who was exiled by Security until his good behavior could win him a pardon, and who was the obvious fall guy for the murder of the head of Security's whole Martian project.

Whaler had been right. He was a man who got things done. Well done, in fact—cooked to a frazzle, with himself as the chief frazzle.

Look out for number one, he told himself grimly!

He dusted himself off, leaving Whaler where he lay, and went looking for a phone booth.

(To Be Concluded)

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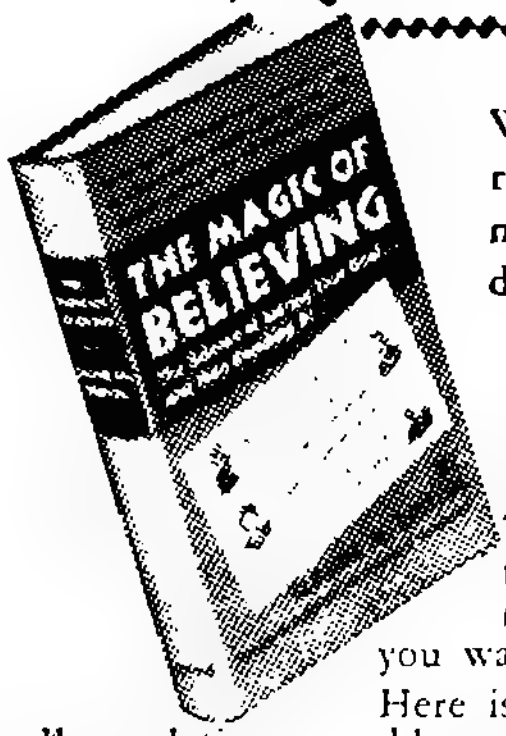

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THE CHART ROOM

Where Readers Help Us Plot Our Orbit

Dear Editor:

I was utterly appalled with the story in your magazine entitled "How Phonetic Can You Get?" by Lester del Rey. I am amazed that you permitted it to find refuge in your publication and I am sure that you have alienated hundreds if not thousands of potential readers.

This is a serious matter that has been the life's work of countless great men, honest, sincere, humanitarian. This mocking, deriding article is enough to undue the work of these valiant workers who sacrifice time and labor (not to mention money, for most of them have been poor men who could not afford even the postage involved in their efforts).

It seems to me that a magazine that purports to be scientific would be constructively scientific -- not destructively.

I believe you owe some sort of an apology to your readers—or some sort of an explanation—the wisest thing you could do would be to order a scientifically correct evaluation of the subject of phonetic reform for the enlightenment of your public—to take away the bitter taste left by the unfortunate publication of that article.

I, for one, am thoroughly disgusted with it, for I have spent over 15 years in the study and research of phonetics and phonetic reform.

S. C. SEEGAY
107 University Place
New York 3, N. Y.

We received several letters complaining about the article on phonetics, and all of them were pretty violent. This might have worried us more, in spite of the fact that the rest of the magazine was well liked. But then we began to count the total comments, and we found that those in favor of the article on phonetics outnumbered those against it by something like thirty to one. In fact, by reader acclaim, it rated just below the two lead stories.

Nevertheless, we felt that it was up to Lester del Rey to answer the complaints. And herewith, we turn it over to him.

Dear Phil:

Out of the small batch you sent me to answer, I've chosen

the letter by Mr. Seegay as the best example of the complaints. He seems to speak for them all, and more strongly than most. I can't promise to answer this fully—not because I feel unsure of my ground, but simply because most of his points are so completely unspecific that no answer is possible.

This was true with others. However, before going on, I'd like to mention that I have read the works of Bell on *Visible Speech*. I first read that some twenty-two years ago, and have studied it thoroughly. That's one of the reasons I no longer think there are any specific number of sounds to any language—if you count local usage, you run into so many shadings that even Bell's remarkable system of writing can't cover it—much less the International Phonetic Alphabet.

There are *not*, as some people claimed, exactly 39 sounds in the language. This comes from mistaking the minimum necessary operations of the voder-vocoder gadgets for the exact sounds to be found in the language as used. How many sounds there are depends entirely upon how roughly you are willing to draw the limits. The "R" in *roar* is not the same sound at the beginning and end of the word. The "L" in *little* also changes from the first sound to the last. And there are distinctions made in English that have been largely dropped in American speech.

So it's a complicated subject, and anyone who can sit back and claim he has found exactly how many of anything goes into it has my admiration for his self-esteem—but not for his erudition in the subject. I've been playing around with it for a couple of decades, and expect to go on for quite a while more.

As to Mr. Seegay, I'm glad to learn that his estimate of the number of people alienated by the article was somewhat wrong. But I agree that phonetics was and is a serious business. All of the advantages I listed at the beginning of that article as possible from a truly phonetic system of writing English are very genuine advantages. Also, all of the disadvantages likely to accrue from the changeover (not the finally adopted system, but the period of transition) are also real.

If Mr. Seegay had read the article carefully, I do not see how he could have missed the point that I was making. I deliberately chose as my hero a young man who was a wild-eyed enthusiast. I mentioned that he had been dabbling with the subject the long period of some two weeks! I painted him as a know-it-all and a dilettante of the worst kind—

someone generally referred to as a goon among experts in any field.

My basic point was never that phonetics is not a serious business. It was simply that it is much too complicated and too unrewarding for any young buckeroo to come into it and simply gain mastery in a week. It is something that will take years of work by the finest possible minds. Sprague makes it much too simple in his article, and I'm sure he knows this.

I've seen some of the examples of new phonetic systems that are constantly being sprung on friends, relatives — and sometimes the public—by enthusiasts who are freshly converted to the field and consider it simple. I saw one in a competing magazine of several years ago, since anthologized. In that, the writer hadn't even realized that he was using one symbol for as many as three *conflicting* sounds, and sometimes using as many as four symbols for what was roughly the same sound!

And a man such as Joe, as I painted him, would naturally rush in where angels have had their tootsies burned, and then run back screaming for mercy when it all didn't turn out to be a simple, easy job—which it is not.

No crack against phonetics was intended. None was taken by most of your readers, obviously.

As to the use of the word *scientific*, I resent having been accused of not being scientific in a subject which has darned little to do with science! Writing is not scientific—the only scientific way in which we now write is by dictating onto some form of record, tape, or film. There, the squiggles are really scientific reproductions of our sounds — if they weren't so complicated that we can't learn to read them fluently.

Writing is at best a matter of convention. I prefer to refer to rational orthography, rather than to phonetics, for that reason. We're lucky to have a good —if somewhat limited—alphabet, but our use of it—even in the phonetic systems—is dictated by custom and choice, not by any rules or science. One sound for one symbol is a nice theory, and it sounds like science. But none of the methods of reproducing the words other than as writing seem to back it up. The most recent work in finding a method whereby the deaf can read the sounds on a small screen actually uses several "symbols" for each sound. One sound for one symbol happens to be a simple, convenient ideal for those of us who use our type of orthog-

raphy. I'm for it, but that has nothing to do with science.

I'd love to see a scientifically correct evaluation of the subject of phonetic reform. I'd also like to see a scientifically correct evaluation of the type of human being we should permit to propagate the species. But I should then like to find out who is equipped to conduct such an investigation, and what can be done about it.

Bell's *Visible Speech* came out a great many years ago. It was the closest thing to a scientific approach to writing that I have seen. It was based upon the idea that sound is a product of the arrangement of the various speaking organs, together with such things as breathing, etc. Professor Bell then invented a set of symbols which could be blended together to depict exactly how those organs were arranged —and still form a single "letter" in the blend. He even achieved a surprisingly graceful result. With it, it is possible for a trained linguist to pronounce accurately sounds which he has never heard before, just from looking at the symbol!

What was the result of all that? As far as enlightening the public is concerned, nothing. Sprague is correct in assuming that people who can read have a vested interest in the system now existing. They see no reason to give up their hard won ability to make sense out of nonsense. And those who can't read, of course, have nothing to do with *Visible Speech*.

Anyhow, who determines what is the correct symbol for a sound which is not the same in various sections? This is not the language of an isolated little community. We have great divisions in it. The Englishman might very seriously object if he saw the same sound represented in *bath* as he sees it in *cat;* the American would consider it unphonetic if he had to learn to spell two sounds (to him the same sound) with two symbols!

I have no way of knowing what Mr. Seegay's actual experience or background in the subject of phonetics is. He has stated that he has been working over fifteen years in it. So have I. And yet—and this is going to be below the belt, Mr. Seegay, if you see this, but you brought it on yourself by your own tone —he does not choose the simplest form of spelling a word, even when that spelling is correct, and the other form not correct in its current use.

You'll notice that he has spelled "undo" as if it were "undue." I do not question the fact that Mr. Seegay knows the distinction. His letter is literate,

and he almost certainly does know the difference. But habit has caught up—and he has spelled the word with a form which is certainly loaded with a silent letter which does not exist in the correct form.

When such things happen to even such men, it proves two things. First, the need for spelling reform is very genuine. Second, the achievement of it is about as close as the achievement of harmony in this split world!

To Mr. Seegay, my apologies for singling out his letter. But since your magazine is short for space this month, I felt that the use of more of these letters—mostly about the same—would perform no useful function. And I felt that Mr. Seegay had expressed himself well enough to make the point for the others as well.

LESTER DEL REY
151 West End Ave.
New York City

Okay, Les, thanks for "clearing the air," and the next time, give us warning before you go into a war where we have to serve as the battlefield. If your piece did that, what will your letter do?

Dear Editor:

No!

This is in references to any and all serials. Again I will reiterate—No!

Not that I have anything against serials as long stories; it's the long stories when presented as serials that makes my blood boil. Please—or I will let your otherwise passable 'zine languish on the stands three days before I buy a copy.

Suggestion: At the end of a year's publication of SFAM, compile *The Dissecting Table* into a book. This inspired bit of caustic commentary should be priceless. There is only one drawback to the idea that I can see—What will happen when dear Damon finds he has to review the compilation?

Hoping to see you in Philly....

LARRY MADDOCK
315 Canal St.
Eaton Rapids, Mich.

We'll try to make sure that we don't use serials you won't be glad to see us use. But beyond that, we can't promise.

You know, I like that idea of seeing Damon Knight have to review a copy of his own collected reviews. Egad, what the man would find to say. Think of the bitter comments he might make on the pointlessness of the plot, on the lack of a consistency of mood, and on the weakness of the characters, who seem to be only a scattering of names.

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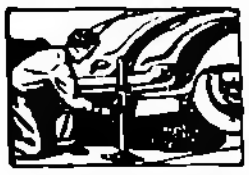

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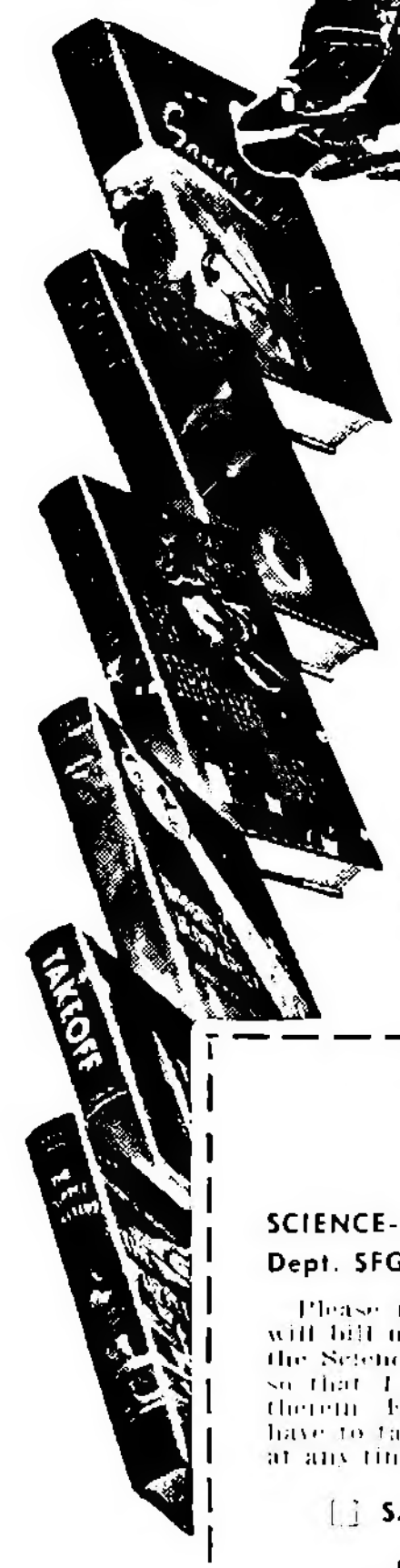

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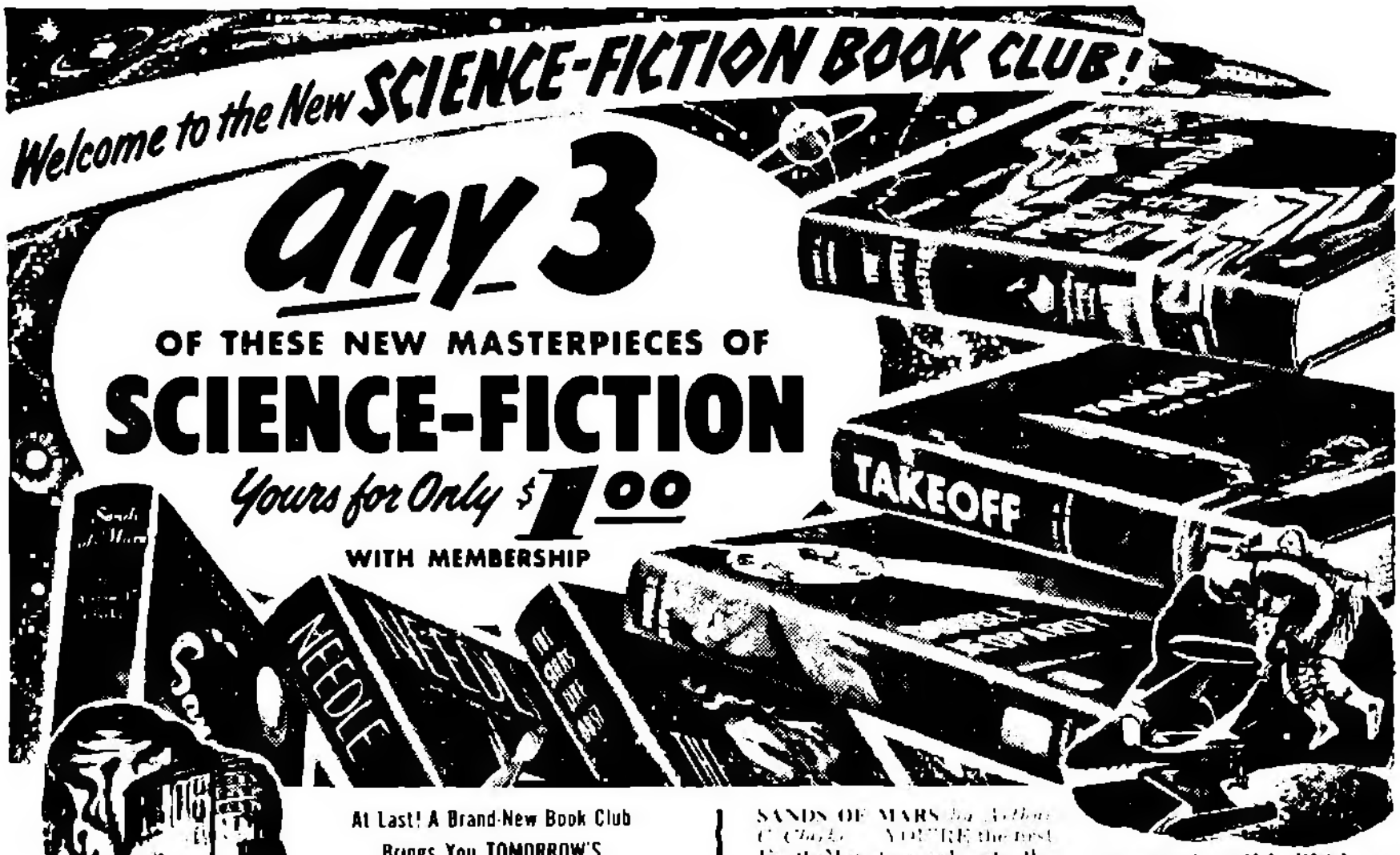

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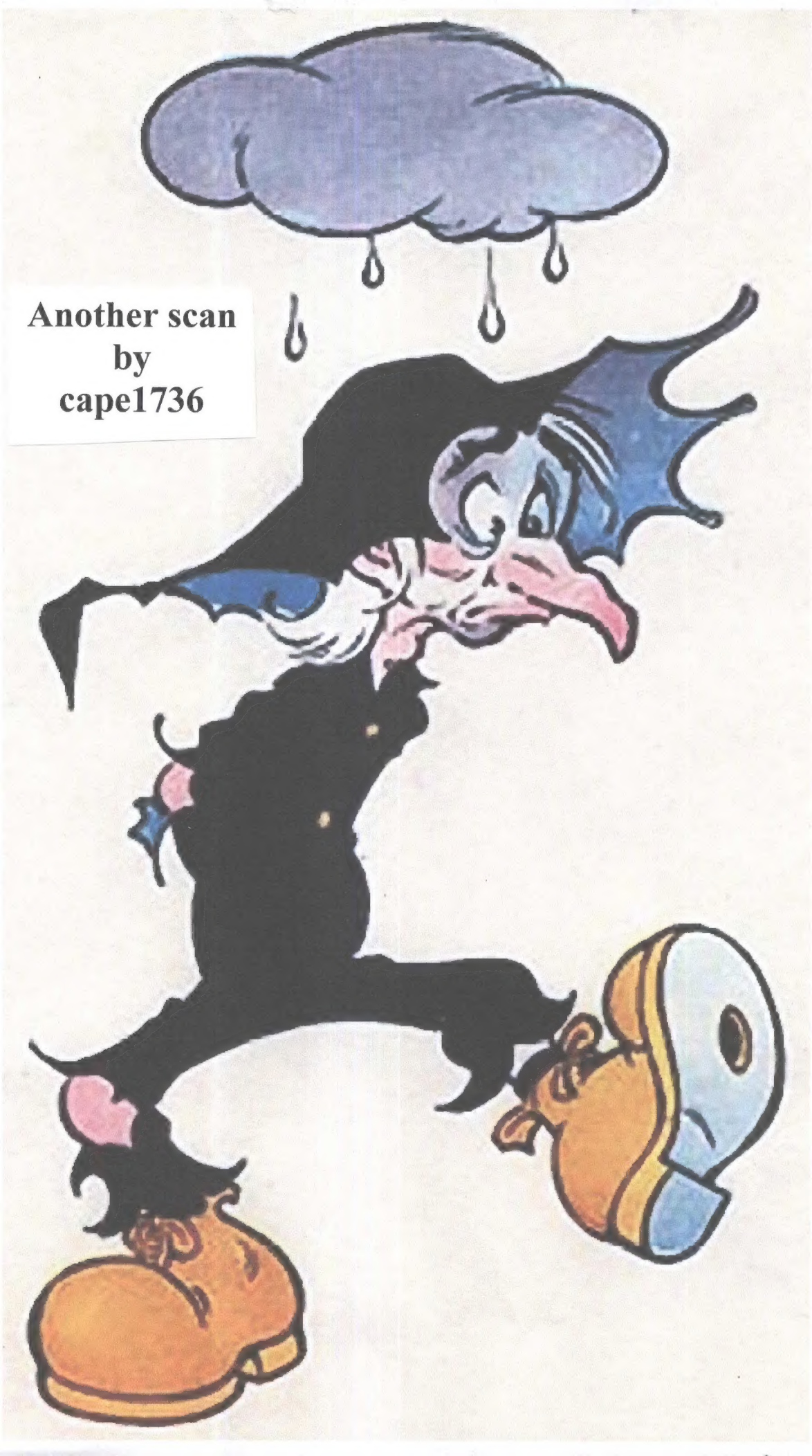
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